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MULESKINNERS AREN'T LADIES! by ART LAWSON

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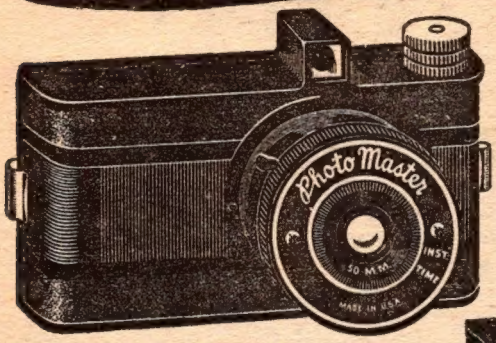

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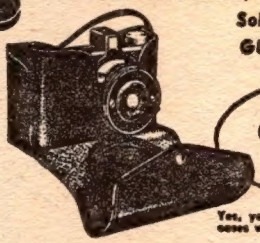

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MULESKINNERS AREN'T LADIES!

Rollicking Western Romance Novel

By Art Lawson

CHAPTER ONE

No Rule-Book for Judy

JUDY GREY was plenty mad at Dan Carter but did her very best to hide it because she had been studying a book recently which taught the advantages of controlling her temper. *Etiquette or the Perfect Lady* was the title of that book. The advice was: "Be not yourself provoked. Why should you give anyone the advantage over you?" So she smiled on Dan Carter in a manner that she believed would appear friendly.

Dan scowled back. "What are you sore about now?" he asked.

"I'm not sore about anything!" she shouted.

Dan shook his head. Dan was a big man with strong shoulders. Once Judy had seen Dan with his shirt off when he was washing up behind the log store. She remembered how white his skin had been in contrast to the tan of his face and neck. She would never forget the clean ripple of his muscles or the way his arms bulged as he blew and splashed in the wooden tub.

That time she had wanted to go up and touch him to see if he was real but had not dared do so and had ducked back around the cabin in confusion before he noticed her. Now all she wanted to do was haul

Beautiful tomboy Judy was a muleskinner—and not a lady, according to Dan. For Dan wanted to marry a fancy girl. He said: "A feller don't want a muleskinner for a wife setting in his parlor."

Judy was determined to stop the fight. She put an arm around Morgan, tickled his chin. . . .

off and kick him in the slats. But she had no shoes on.

"If you're not sore," Dan asked slowly, "what are you hollering about?"

"I'm not hollering!" she insisted, her voice staying way up there despite herself. Her denial only made Dan appear more worried than ever. At the moment his good-looking homely face was like an amiable hound dog's. Judy tried to defend herself. "I'm not mad," she said. "If I was hollering it's only because I have something in my throat." She coughed to make it realistic. "I'm not even sore. I'm really very happy. I'm glad you're not going to work for Pa any more, and I'm especially glad you're going to start a horse ranch down to Laughing Squaw Creek. But what I'm gladdest of is that you'll have Miss Vivian Cummings for a neighbor."

"Well—gosh—" Dan Carter's big grin broke out like the sun rising. He and Judy had walked up from the store in the cool of the evening to where they could sit on a log and watch the trout jumping in Nine Mile River. She had gotten to her feet when she started to shout. Now she abruptly sat down again, taking care to keep a good yard of empty space between her and Dan. "One thing was worryin' me," he went on. "I know you don't take to Viv, and—"

"Viv—?" Judy said, forgetting what her etiquette book told about showing your emotions. "I don't have anything against her. She's just too damn top-lofty, that's all. But I don't care. And if you want to live next to a city girl why should I give a hoot?"

Judy gave him a very brief glance with eyes that were dark as the sky at midnight. Then she veiled them completely with long, up-curving lashes, and turned to stare at the river. Her usually full mouth was set so tightly her cheeks glistened and her body in the beaded doeskin skirt and shirt was tense and tight. Her small hands were clasped over bare, brown knees as if she was a spring about to let loose and bound all over the place.

"I have a special reason for living down there," Dan defended himself.

"I don't doubt that you do," Judy answered.

Dan took a deep breath. He dug at the ground for a moment with the heel of his boot. He picked a bit of bark off the log and flipped it into the river. A trout nosed it, then sounded. Judy was making this mighty hard for him.

"I asked you to come up here to this log for a special reason," he said, carefully selecting his words, "because I got something special to tell you. You and I have done a lot of fishin' off this old log. I sort of feel that it is *our* log."

For a long time Judy had felt the same way about it, and it touched her deeply that this big ox had come to the same thought by himself. In her dreams she had often pictured herself sitting on this log with Dan—not fishing, just sitting—and she had even made up the speech that he would use when he proposed to her. It had been a little more to the point that the one he seemed to be working into.

"You and me have had a lot of fun together," he went on.

She let go of her knees and lifted her head to glance up at him. If he had been a real hound dog, she thought, he would be making little tentative wags of his tail. Her lips fulled up a bit at the thought, making her look very desirable and kissable. This time her smile was not a faked one.

"Yes, Dan'l?"

Dan pushed back his hat to run fingers through his thick hair. He was red in the face as if he had been running hard, and his breathing had become shallow. He seemed completely uncomfortable. He said:

"Time comes in every man's life when he —well, you can't always be workin' for somebody else. You've got to have your own place. Like a house and things."

There was tenderness in Judy's dark eyes, and all through her small body a strange anticipation surged. Without changing her place on the log she leaned slightly toward him, turning from her hips now, not just twisting her head. This was the moment for which she had been waiting so long.

Though it hardly followed the pattern of her dream she recognized it right away. It brought a flutter to her heart and a wild pulse to her throat. Expecting that Dan would finally take her in his arms and kiss her, Judy wondered what it would be like. Subconsciously her eyelashes fluttered and she arched her back as she angled toward him.

"Sure thing, Dan'l," she said softly. "A girl feels that way, too."

Her lips were warm and she could feel the blood in them, a swift, tiny fluttering rush waiting for fulfillment. Dan's tenseness eased up a lot.

"Why—damn it," he said. "I knew you'd understand, Judy. You always do. But you know—your pa was so het up when I told him I was going to quit. He wanted to know where in hell I thought he'd find another man to drive his wagons down from Fort Curry. So when you started actin' up, too, I thought—"

"I was just surprised, Dan'l," Judy said dreamily. "That's different from being sore." He had his hat in his hands now, freeing his yellow hair that glistened in the evening light. Though Judy had known Dan almost all her life he looked different now, even beautiful, almost. He began to fan his hot face with the old felt. Judy had him on the verge, she believed, and she had to keep him going. She had to encourage him not too obviously. She added: "Pa'll find someone, Dan'l. He'll find himself a new clerk, too, I reckon."

"You ain't leavin', too, are you?" Dan said in astonishment and stopped fanning his face.

Judy began to feel prickly and queer. It started in her temples and spread down the back of her neck. Then it rushed all over her. The blood left her lips and the arch of her back became only a pain. She had made the terrible mistake of believing in the dream again.

"I mean when the time comes," she said hoarsely. Her mouth was stiff and unnatural and she could not look at Dan any more. "Girls grow up, too," she added. "Like fellers. Meet a guy. Get hitched. Have babies. You can't do all that and still run your old man's store."

"That's what I was going to tell you about," Dan said quickly, running it all into one word.

Judy glanced around at him, turning her hear so fast the dark hair switched around her neck. A sudden little pain ticked through her heart and fluttered into her chest. She was sure he could see the pulse of it beating under the doeskin shirt. But he seemed blind to everything now except this idea that had gotten a hold on him. She blinked at him, not speaking. And now that he had gotten this far with his confession he spilled it out like water from an upturned rain barrel.

"Figured on buildin' a corral, first," he said. "Stock it with some good horses. I dropped in on Doc on the way down from Curry. He had a couple of geldings he wants me to break for him. Pay cash or take it out in trade only I'm never sick. Get enough money for hardware from it anyhow, and then I can build a little house there on the knoll. Maybe you never seen it, the knoll." Dan's eyes were glowing as he pictured this ranch he was going to chop out of the wilderness. "It's up there where you can see the river and Laughin' Squaw Creek and the teeth of Wolf Mountain all at once. Purtier'n a post card."

Judy could see it all right, very clearly. She could even see the house just as she might have helped him build it, cutting the notches herself and splitting the logs for the floor. She could picture the furniture they might have made, too, smoothed and polished with fine river sand. But the house he was talking about was a different house —and she was not in it.

She cleared her throat and stared at him.

"Sounds nice," she gasped.

"Then I figured on askin'—" his voice choked up—"on speakin' to Viv." He broke down completely.

Then Judy found that he looked so eager and unhappy she could not be angry with him any more. She was completely heartbroken, that was all, and she felt as if a huge cottonwood tree had fallen on her or a herd of buffalo had stampeded over her. She took a deep breath and held it a moment.

"I hope Viv enjoys the view," she said.

She got up and her legs felt as if they were sticks, and she walked away not knowing where she was going. Dan did not follow her.

CHAPTER TWO

Muleskinned in the Parlor

JUDY cut through the woods to the path along Sandy Creek and came down to the store which sat on a point of fairly high land where the creek joined the river. Grey's Store is what they called it

and all the huddle of log buildings around it, shacks and barns and corrals. Some day when there was a town on this point it would probably be called Grey's Store, too, unless it grew to be very big and they had to name it something fancy.

A very good saddle horse and a couple of pack mules that had been unloaded were drawn up before the store announcing to Judy that they had a visitor. A bunch of Indians dozed under their blankets on the porch. An ex-buffalo-hunter with a red beard slept curled up under a tree with an upturned jug beside him. This man who was known as Red Mike occasionally worked for Judy's pa but more often took a gold pan and pick and shovel into the mountains to try for gold in the creeks. Judy stepped around him and into the store.

A stranger was with Pa. And Pa was furious with Judy when she came inside. Pa's big beard was waving.

"My daughter," he said to the stranger, trying to control himself for sake of the company. "Judy—I want you to step up and say 'Hello' to Mister William Morgan. Then get to hell out to the kitchen and cook some supper. Mister Morgan's come a long ways today and the both of us are starved, damn it."

Demurely Judy crossed the room. There were counters and shelves on both side walls loaded with goods and other great stacks of boxes, blankets, clothing and sacks on the floor. To the rear a small space had been cleared around the stove. The men stood in this area near a poker table under a couple of lamps hung by chains from the roof.

The stranger was smiling, and Judy noticed despite her broken heart that he was very handsome with a short-clipped mustache. He was dressed like a dude in flat-heeled boots that laced up to his knees. She put out a hand to shake with him. His grip was good.

"Glad to know you, Miss Judy," the stranger said.

"Pleased to meet you," Judy said, looking straight into his eyes which were quite as dark as her own. There seemed to be laughter hidden in them, but his face was completely sober.

"Your father's been telling me his troubles—lost his teamster just when he needs him the most."

Anger still fought with heartbreak inside Judy's breast. "He wasn't so much," she said. To her father she added: "Keep your shirt on, Pa. I'll have supper ready before you can draw up a chair and tuck the napkin in your vest."

Pa had not used a napkin for years. Mister William Morgan laughed aloud as Judy hurried into the leanto behind the store that was used as a summer kitchen. During the winter she cooked the meals right inside and slept in the cluttered loft that covered the rear half of the log store. But the breezes blowing up the river in the summer kept the leanto cool and pleasant and made cooking a real pleasure for Judy.

Before she had gone up-river with Dan she had put on water for the potatoes and started the beans simmering. Now she mixed sourdough for biscuits and sliced bacon to fry. When she had everything going okay she picked up the small axe to chop some kindling for tomorrow's fire. On the way past the back door she heard Pa talking angrily with the stranger. It was her own name that made her stop.

" . . . be marryin' with my Judy next thing you know," Pa was saying. "She's been up there this evenin' sittin' on a log with him. Not that I give a damn, Mister Morgan, but with you finding that mine up here in this country I stand to make a killin'. Been waitin' all my life for something like that. So this big muleskinner up and decides to run out on me—"

She heard Morgan mutter something in reply, and she hurried off to the woodpile. Judy was not very much impressed with the dude's discovery. Pa was always getting excited about the gold in the creeks—but it always turned out to be low-grade ore that was practically worthless. It was an old story to Judy.

Then she began to wonder. Had Dan talked to the stranger before going up the river with her? Had he told her only half his plans?

Pa's notion that she was going to marry Dan Carter was quite natural. Dan had been living around here for years. He had gone away once to break horses for an outfit in the Wyoming Territory, and later had worked a bunch of beef on shares. But a blizzard had wiped him out so he came back to tool Pa's mule team and wagons down from Fort Curry once a month.

So when Pa noticed that Judy was growing up and rounding out he sort of picked Dan for son-in-law. He told Judy to keep away from Dan who was a no-good scoundrel. Judy knew that he had put it that way because he thought she was just naturally a balky girl and would then do the opposite.

It had set her to thinking about Dan—and pretty soon she was seeing things in him that had not been visible before. After a while she knew she had just naturally fallen in love with him. Now it was hell spelled out in bright red type. . . .

At supper time Pa was really putting his heart into cussing out Dan Carter who was eating with the rest of the men in the store. Mister William Morgan had joined them, too. And Dan's most recent swamper was there with his face washed and bright. Red Mike was still outside with the Indians. Judy was serving the four men while they wrangled back and forth.

"Prac'ly brung you up from a pup," Pa griped at Dan, "an' what do you do? Quit. You quit just when I need you the most."

Dan's face seemed to have acquired a permanent redness. "Ain't quittin'," he said. "Just settin' out on my own. That's different. Feller can't go get married—" He glanced around for Judy but she was outside listening very intently. "Can't get married if he's only a muleskinner for some ornery old storekeeper."

"Ornery, huh!" Pa bellowed at Dan. "Look here. It ain't you. I don't give a hair off my chest for you, bud. It's because you're figurin' on stealin' away my Judy."

Judy dropped a pan of sourdough biscuits on the stove. It made a terrific clatter. But even with the ringing in her ears she could hear Dan's quiet and tense answer:

"I ain't takin' her away from you, Pa. It's Viv Cummings I'm goin' to marry," he said. "Why—gosh—" he sounded astounded—"Judy's only a kid. She ain't hardly out of her short pants."

Judy heard a very soft whooshing sound that followed Dan's statement as if Pa and the stranger and the swamper were all taking deep breaths and Dan was letting out his. Then her ears began to buzz.

Dan Carter kept on building up his case. "Viv's different," he said. "She's growed up. Look—I'll tell you what I mean. She's a lady. Judy's a good kid. She can skin mules and cuss and even cook. But a feller don't want a muleskinner for a wife setting in his parlor."

Nobody answered him.

THE humming in Judy's ears grew louder and louder until it blew up like a cannister shot. Judy began to tremble. To herself she tapped her bare toes on the hard-packed ground of the summer kitchen. She brushed back her dark hair and fluffed it over her shoulders. She wished very desperately that she had wangled one of those trade calico dresses out of Pa. They were not as fancy as the outfits that Vivian Cummings always wore, but they were real clothes and she guessed that with the proper rig she could show Dan who was a lady—and no mistake.

Then she picked up the coffee pot and went into the store just as if she had heard nothing. The intent eyes of all four men were on her. Dan Carter was plainly miserable as if he wanted Judy to understand him as she always had before. Pa was just plain glum. The swamper was more amused than anything else. But Mister William Morgan looked upon her with a new and lively interest. There was a gleam in his dark eyes as she bent down to fill his coffee cup. He let that glance move slowly over her face and lovely figure. Then he glanced up at her eyes.

Judy knew that he was looking at someone he very definitely did not think of as a short-pants kid.

"Thank you," he said gallantly when she set the can of condensed milk before him.

Judy suddenly realized that everyone had taken her for granted before, never thanking her for anything, and she smiled her gratitude on Mister Morgan. Then that smile took on a subtle change until it was no longer the sort of smile she usually gave to men around this place. It made Mister Morgan blink.

Pa, seeing it, pushed away his beard with the back of his hand and went to work on the coffee. The swamper cleared his throat. If Dan did anything at all, Judy did not know, because she did not bother to glance over at him. . . .

Judy Grey washed the dishes in a great hurry, leaving them stacked on the sink to dry by themselves. By the talk in the store

she knew that the men were working up a poker game and would soon be suggesting that she make a fifth. Despite her etiquette book's stating that gambling was wicked and a sin she often played with her Pa and his friends.

Sometimes she won and sometimes she lost, but it really made little difference to her because Pa took what she gained and paid her losses. But Judy did not want to play tonight. On the spur of the moment when Mister Morgan had thanked her she had made a terrible decision. Now she had to get away to think it out.

She went to the little pole shanty where she slept in the summer. Dan Carter had helped her build this, and she had played out the notion at the time that it was practice against the day when Dan would construct a bigger and more permanent house.

Now he was going to do that for somebody else. And Judy might have taken that. But a hot little flame burned in her heart when she thought of the things Dan had said about her. He had not only called her a short pants kid but had by inference accused her of not being a lady. Those two cracks were a declaration of war to Judy Grey.

For a long while she sat in her rocking chair in the dark doorway of the little shanty thinking about these things. Then she got up and undressed swiftly. Wrapping a towel tightly about herself she glanced out over Grey's Store. Lamps glowed in the region of the poker table and horses moved in the corrals.

The starlight was clear and fine above her, and the creek not too far away. Scurrying along like some little night animal, she ran to the creek bank and slid down to a sand bar. She stopped to roll her hair into a knot on the top of her head, then straightened up to move the few short paces to the water.

Judy leaned down to poke a finger into the water that was cool and clean. There she could see herself in the soft darkness. There were two of her here, the one in the star-studded pool and the more palpable Judy on the sand bar. She was not quite sure what was happening to her. It was as if she was living many years in one evening. It was as if Dan Carter and Mister William Morgan were both right, as if she was not only a short-pants kid but a desirable woman as well. She would give Vivian Cummings a mighty good run for her money.

Judy went into the water then, swimming silently. She wanted to dive and play as an otter will do but resisted the temptation in order to keep her hair dry. Reluctantly she finally came back to the bar to rub herself with a brisk towel. Then she climbed the bank.

Running, Judy cut around one of the corrals and suddenly slid to a halt. A light was burning where there had been no light before in her tiny one-room house.

CHAPTER THREE

The Mustache Tickles

THE towel covered Judy from chin to knee because it was a big towel and she was a smallish girl. It covered as much of Judy as her doeskin dress would have; but the girl never-the-less felt stark naked as she crept slowly across the dark yard toward her little shanty and the flickering light therein.

Judy knew her yard minutely. She knew where she could find cover almost instantly if she needed it—or in which direction she could run if she had to. She also knew where the chinking had fallen out of her cabin making a little hole through which she could peek without being seen.

She found the spot, leaned down to look, and was staring at the stiff back of Vivian Cummings. Just by looking at Vivian's back Judy knew that the doctor's daughter was very impatient about something. Perversely it made Judy feel better. As sedately as if she were gowned for a dance at the fort Judy walked around the cabin and through the doorway.

"Hi—Viv," she said, shutting the door behind her.

"Goodness!" Vivian said. It was those big blue eyes, Judy thought, that had roped in Dan. Vivian jumped to her feet. Judy had completely surprised her. Vivian motioned at the doeskin skirt and shirt and other items on the bed, waving her hand at them nervously, then at Judy. "I never thought—" she said. Then sharply she asked: "What in earth have you been doing, Judy?"

Judy danced across the room, passing very close to Vivian because the room was so small. Vivian backed up against the bed, nearly falling on it. Judy laughed lightly. "Swimming," she said. "Dancing in the starlight. Kicking up my heels." Vivian was absolutely shocked. "I don't suppose you'd carry on like that?" Judy added.

"Certainly not," Vivian said. Vivian even backed away from Judy as if afraid the dark girl's behaviour would contaminate her. "What will you pa think?"

"He wouldn't care, Judy said. Taking a dig while she had the chance she added: "Neither would Dan Carter." Then she shuddered and sat heavily on the bunk. The exhileration had run out of her. She wanted to cry.

She steeled herself to look directly at Vivian Cummings and she had to admit that Vivian was a very pretty person. Blue eyes and blonde hair trained to tight ringlets that danced on small shoulders were set off nicely by a really luscious figure that Judy thought a bit too soft and curvey. But men like girls of Vivian's type and always would, Judy reckoned. Futhermore Vivian had a proper upbringing and would undoubtedly make a fine wife for the man who got her. Vivian was plainly horrified at the suggestion that Dan might have seen Judy swimming.

Judy said slowly: "Even if Dan had been there he would not have seen me. He's blind. He thinks I'm still in my short pants. I doubt if it ever occurred to him that I might be a girl just the same. Congratulations."

Doubtfully Vivian stared at Judy. She seemed quite uncertain about what to do. Then she said quite crisply: "Judy—your father sent me for you. He wants to see you right away. Judy—I wondered if you would be my bride's maid."

Judy had to close her eyes very tightly. She did not know if she could go through with that. But she was deeply moved that Vivian had asked her. She was beginning to feel small and afraid again.

Finally she said: "Thanks, Vivian. Tell Pa'll I'll be right along."

Judy spent a long while brushing out her dark hair and fluffiing it up over her shoulders. When it was gleaming and soft she put a red ribbon in it and got dressed in her very best doeskin outfit. The skirt had beads in the fringe that tinkled around her knees when she walked. She wore beaded leggings and a fine pair of moccasins a Sioux squaw had given her. Shoes of any sort did not make much sense to Judy Grey except in winter. But if she was going to be a lady she reckoned she had better dress the way a lady should, and since she did not have dainty satin slippers like Vivian's these moccasins would have to do.

Though Judy had learned a lot about herself tonight she had not the faintest idea how truly lovely she was. The bright bead and quill work in the tawny doeskin was a perfect setting for her dark wilderness beauty. It gave a voluptuousness to her slim figure and youthfully firm curves. It put a brightness into her eyes and caused Mister Morgan to stare at her in frank admiration when she came into the store. He promptly jumped to his feet and offered her a chair.

Nothing like this had ever happened before to Judy Grey. She had read about it in her etiquette book and knew that she should curtesy to the gentleman and accept his offer or murmur her thanks and move on. But she had no opportunity to do either. Her father was all heated up and shouting at her again.

"Where the heck have you been? First we want you to take a hand in poker. Then the doc comes with Miss Vivian. Then—" He ran out of breath.

Vivian said: "She's been kicking her heels at the stars."

Judy stared at the girl. Just a few minutes ago Vivian had been the nicest girl possible when she asked Judy to be her bride's maid. Now she seemed snippy again and Judy did not know why.

Mister Morgan laughed politely at Vivian's comment while the rest of the men gaped at Judy. Even Doc Cummings was admiring her. Judy could see it in his fine gray eyes. It bucked her up.

"Sure," she said. "Viv's right. Dancing in the moonlight. I was down to the crik cooling off, Pa."

"Not—?" Pa stopped, and it was a question.

"Sure," Judy said defiantly, "why not?"

Then Doc Cummings came to her rescue. "We were wondering if you would do us a big favor, Judy?"

SHE had always liked Doc Cummings though Vivian generally annoyed her. Doc never cussed like the teamsters and trappers or hollered like Pa. He was always soft spoken and gentle. Now there was a little laughter behind his gray eyes.

"You know I would, Doc," Judy said.

"My daughter," he explained nodding toward Dan, "is preparing to marry the estimable Mister Dan Carter. She's going to try the rustic life." Judy could not help blinking. It was bad enough before, but this was making it sort of official and immutable. But the Doc went on as if he had not read her expression. "I felt she should have a trousseau of sorts. So we have arranged with your father to have her go up to the fort with the next wagon train to do some special shopping and bring back a preacher. We wondered if you would go along as a—" he hesitated, searching for the right word—"a companion."

"But Pa's muleskinner quit," Judy said.

"He's going to make one more trip. We've arranged everything," the doctor said.

Dan Carter nodded.

Judy grinned at him. "When do we start?"

"Tomorrow morning," Dan said. His face was red. He turned to Pa who seemed to be getting set for another argument.

"One more load, Pa said; "a big one, and I'll be damned glad to be rid of you." Pa had a big wide mad on tonight. "You're takin' two wagons and sixteen mules to bring back a double load. If you can pick up a third wagon at the fort fill that up, too. Mister Morgan's—"

Mister William Morgan sneezed suddenly and loudly, a strange thing Judy thought, for a man who was so polite. Immediately he begged everybody's pardon.

"As you were saying, Mister Grey—?" he said.

"I wasn't sayin' nothin'," Pa said glumly.

The Cummings went home soon after that in their buckboard which had been drawn up before the store. For a while Judy busied herself gathering provisions for the trip to the fort. Dan Carter hung around trying to help her. He was more like a worried hound dog than even. Clumsily he tripped over things, and Judy secretly was pleased.

For a moment he had Judy cornered in a far part of the store where she had gone for a bigger coffee-pot than the one Dan generally took along with him.

"You're all dressed up," he accused.

"I'm not dressed up," she said.

"You got a ribbon in your hair," he countered. "You got shoes on."

Dan had blocked the aisle so she could not get around him. He was big and gloomy. From the moment he blocked her in the corner all resemblance to hound left his face. Judy glared at him and waved the coffee pot at him.

She shouted: "Let me by!"

But Dan would not move. He was like a mountain. He stood there before her with fists clenched and a hunching of his shoulders. Anger stirred through him, darkening his eyes and reddening his cheeks where muscles bunched in lean, hard knots.

"If you're dressing up for that mining hombre," he said, "I'll put you over my knees and whup you. I saw you lookin' at him from the corners of your eyes tonight when you poured his coffee—leanin' down and smilin' at him."

"What's it to you?" Judy countered.

"Plenty!" Dan said.

He put so much vehemence into it the word thrilled through Judy like a shot of electricity from one of those glass batteries in the telegraph office at the fort. She felt it come right up from her toes to bang against the top of her skull like a shattered bottle. She smiled insolently at him.

"It means nothing to me," she said. "And I'll do what I please. You have your girl. I'm going to get my man."

Then she tried to duck past him and Dan's big hand slapped down on her shoulder almost knocking her over. He held her anchored helplessly for a moment, then began to shake her, not very violently, but as if he was trembling and could not stop it. His usually easy-going blue eyes were cold and hard now, and the grip on her shoulder was beginning to pain her. She screamed shrilly and whacked him on the side of the head with the coffee-pot.

It was a question which was the more surprised. Dan let go of her and she stood gasping, staring at the pot handle which was all that was left in her hand.

There was a rush of foot-steps from the rear of the store. Mister Morgan came into

view behind a couple of crates beyond Dan who still stared stupidly at Judy. Judy screamed again and Mister Morgan attacked. He grabbed Dan by the arm and whirled about to face him.

Still holding onto Dan, Mister Morgan came up with a violent uppercut from his toes. It connected with Dan's jaw, lifted him off the floor and dropped him at Judy's feet. Dan got to his hands and knees but Morgan rushed him. While Dan was still groggy he smashed him back into a stack of picks and shovels. Dan lay in the wreckage breathing wheezily.

Judy had impulsively started to kneel beside him when she remembered she was still angry with him and it served him right. She glanced over at Mister Morgan, smiling tentatively. Dan rolled over. He got to his hands and knees again but Judy daintly stepped between him and his adversary to break up the fight.

"Thank you, Mister Morgan," she said and smiled.

Dan was on his feet now, staggering and swaying. He tapped Judy on the back with one big finger.

"Move over," he growled.

Mister Morgan looked as if he would be pleased to continue the fight. Judy was determined to stop the fight. She put an arm around Morgan, tickled his chin to distract him. When that didn't work she went up on her toes and pulled his head down to kiss him on the mouth. His neatly trimmed mustache tickled her upper lip. Then she fled past her pa and out of the store.

CHAPTER FOUR

Judy's Love Lessons

JUDY was playing a game whose rules she did not know. It was a desperate game with the winner take all, and even when she had started it Judy had known that she would almost surely be the loser. Nor was her book of etiquette any help now. It plainly stated that no lady with any pretentions to the name would throw herself at a man.

But she reckoned unhappily that she

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would have to do it anyway. If she did not throw herself at Dan Carter nobody else would do it for her and he consequently would never catch her. He would just go ahead and marry Vivian Cummings as he had stated was his intention.

So Judy went to sleep that night clinging to the tiny ray of hope that had been lighted when Dan started acting up over Mister Morgan. It might be just brotherly interest, she realized. But a girl can still hope.

Judy woke early, before dawn, and had breakfast cooking before the first man moved. It was Dan Carter, sour as an unripe lemon. Dan washed up out of a bucket before coming to the kitchen for coffee. He so obviously ignored last night's business Judy could think of nothing else. She recalled with some shame that she had kissed the mining engineer for rescuing her from Dan.

Dan blew on his coffee and sipped it gingerly. It was hot and black and pungent. Then Dan glanced through the steam for a moment and his eyes were directly on Judy's.

"That no-good swamper of mine ran out durin' the night," he said. "He stole Mister Morgan's mules and prospectin' outfit. Red Mike's gone, too. Reckon they figure on findin' Mister Morgan's claim." His eyes were blank for a second. "If my ear hadn't been ringing like a cracked bell I would have heard them," he added.

Judy flared at him. "Just keep your hands off me and I won't bash you across the ear with a coffee pot." Then she was a little sorry for Dan. This coming marriage of his which should have been a very pleasant thing was already on the dismal side. She added: "It wasn't your fault—losing the mules, I mean. Besides, I guess Mister Morgan's not going to worry much. If that mine is such big shucks an old mule won't mean much to him and he'll be able to file his claim before those two hombres can jump it."

Dan shrugged. Pa had come to the back door of the store and was hitching up his pants. He tucked in his shirt before crossing over to the summer kitchen for his eye-opener of coffee. It was gray and quiet and fresh out here this morning with the sun still behind the eastern hills, but Pa's humor was even worse than Dan's. Pa glared at Judy for a moment.

When she reached for the pot to pour him a cup of coffee he got to it first and poured his own. He put a couple of spoonsful of sugar into it and stirred vigorously. He cleared his throat. Suddenly he turned his back on Judy and squared off in front of Dan Carter.

"Look, Dan," he said. "I got to talk fast before that dude miner shows up." He cleared his throat again and Dan backed up a short step as if he wanted none of the old man's suggestions or advice. Pa said quickly: "Morgan's goin' along with you. He says the hell with tryin' to catch his mules. Your swamper and Red Mike are welcome to them, he says. All he wants to do is go along and ship that—the—stuff in them bags. Now, look—I don't want any funny business, see? When I mean is my daughter Judy ain't actin' normal since that dude showed up. Neither are you. What I want you to do is see to it that she don't do anything she'll be ashamed of."

Judy was outraged. "Pa—" she shouted.

Dan hunched up his shoulders. "I don't figure me and the dude are goin' to get along any too damn well," he said to Pa. "Besides, I'm not sure I want to nursemaid Judy."

"And I don't need any nurse, either!" Judy shouted.

Dan was rubbing his jaw where the miner had smacked him last night. Pa turned on Judy.

"Maybe you'd ruther stay in the store," he said.

It was an order, not a suggestion, and Judy was not in the habit of going against her father. But now more than ever she wanted to make that trip to the fort. She absolutely had to go.

"Dan'll never be able to make it without a swamper—with two wagons and sixteen mules," she said quickly. "Like he said last night—I can skin mules and cuss or lean on a brake." Dan was going red at the memory of what he had said and at the news that he had been overheard. Judy let him have both barrels. "Besides—" she grinned impudently—"I'm only a short-pants kid and it isn't likely a grown man would even take a glance at me."

The corners of Pa's eyes crinkled. She had sold him a bill of goods.

"See to it that you behave," he shouted, and when he put the coffee cup to his mouth

Judy knew that he had been yelling at Dan, not at her. And then she began to wonder if Pa had pulled a bluff, if it was like the time he had told her to stay away from Dan and had known it would just drive her to him. She could not tell by looking at Pa, either.

Mister William Morgan loaded two very heavy-looking leather sacks on the leading wagon. He and Pa made quite a play over the sacks so none of the Indians hanging around the store would get ideas. For the first time since she had heard Pa mention the gold Judy began to feel an excitement over it. Those sacks weighed over a hundred pounds each and she hated to think what they might be worth. Before this she had not really believed the dude had found anything important.

"These here smoked buffalo tongues will be mighty special eatin' food for your friends in the East," Pa bluffed.

"Yes, sir," Mister Morgan agreed, handling his sack as if it was not very heavy. "They don't get victuals like this back home."

The Indians dozed in the sun. Judy climbed to the rear wagon and kicked at the brake which groaned and squawked uncomfortably when it loosened up. Dan and the mining engineer were studiously avoiding one another. Deliberately Judy moved over and patted the high seat beside her. Mister Morgan took the hint, tied his saddle horse to the rear of the wagon and climbed up to sit beside her.

"Looks like a mighty nice trip ahead," he said genially.

There was a queer glimmer in his eye that Judy could not readily decode. Then Dan strode stiffly up to the forward wagon and climbed aboard. Ordinarily he would have glanced back to see if Judy had let off the brake. But this fine morning he ignored her.

He snapped his long whip with great violence and cussed the mules into movement. The miner put a hand on one of Judy's, and the girl was too astonished to move away. But at that instant the big wagon lurched into the rutted trail and after that the mining hand had to concentrate all his talents on keeping aboard. Love-making, if any, would have to wait until night.

This was a relief to Judy Grey who rode the great Conestoga with an easy grace, giving to the movement of the wagon rather than fighting it. It gave her something to think about, too. They would be a week on the way to the fort. Anything might happen.

"Haw!" Dan shouted at the lead mule and pulled on the jerkline. The long parade of teams followed the lead to the left, then straightened out on the road down the river. Mister Morgan looked sick but clung on desperately until they reached Doc Cumming's place. There, battered and sore, he apologetically climbed down to feel the welcome solidity of the earth beneath his feet. Judy left the brake off and crawled up over the forward wagon to the seat. Silently Dan handed her the line and whip. He refused to look at her before jumping down to the yard.

VIVIAN had rushed out onto her porch, already breathless. She waved at Judy, called to Dan, and had a smile for Mister Morgan. Despite her broken heart Judy was amused with Vivian who had rigged herself out in a longskirted travelling suit, a duster and a big hat with a veil on it to protect her face from the sun.

Before they had progressed many miles toward the fort Vivian would be tripping all over the place in that long skirt while Judy would be free and easy in her pants and shirt. There were advantages, Judy reckoned, in not being a lady all the time. But ruefully she added the thought that it did not help capture your man.

Mister Morgan had come up to the forward wagon. Dan was bringing a carpet bag with rawhide-bound trunk down from the house. He threw these into the rear wagon and went back for a folding army cot and some blankets. Vivian Cummings, it appeared, was going to travel in comfort.

"She'll need a hospital after a day's ride on these wagons," Mister Morgan observed with a laugh.

Dan had gone back to the house and around to the rear with Vivian who walked in short steps, holding her long skirts up from the dust. Judy, from her vantage point could see Dan roping a horse in the corral, and she recognized it as one of a pair of matched bays.

"They're hitching up the buckboard," Judy said. Mister Morgan lifted his eye-

brows and Judy added: "All alone—and she's such a fragile thing, Mister Morgan. Imagine Miss Cummings driving that buckboard all alone—for six days. And if there should be a runaway—"

Mister Morgan said: "Ah—" and when the party was on the road again he travelled ahead with the buckboard and the doctor's daughter. Judy settled on the seat of the lead Conestoga alongside Dan Carter. When they hit hilly going she would move back to tend the brake of her own wagon. But meanwhile she was content to stay here even though Dan glared straight ahead under wrinkled brows.

The mining man and Vivian were carrying on quite an animated conversation while their light carriage bounced along the road. Judy began to smile. The six day trip was beginning to look interesting.

She waited for a good lurch of the wagon and let it throw her up against Dan. Their hips touched for a second. Then Dan edged away. Judy moved back to her side of the seat and waited for another propitious lurch. . . .

They pitched camp early the first night, choosing a spot where a creek came into the river with a wide, grassy flat stretched up to the wooded slope. Here they picketted the mules. The men stretched a tarpaulin over the wagon bows to form a bedroom for Vivian. While Dan set up her folding cot Mister Morgan fetched a pail of water from the river for her. They thought of a dozen other things they could do for Vivian but it apparently never occurred to either of them to cut kindling for the fire or to do anything for Judy.

Nor did Judy mind. Smiling secretly to herself she brought a big towel from her pack and wandered off upstream. Here a narrow trail led to a pass over the mountains. Where the ground was damp Judy noticed fresh mule tracks. Her first impulse was to go back for Mister Morgan to tell him she located his stolen animals.

On second thought she decided that these must be some other mules. Red Mike and the swamper would have gone up the river, not down, while hunting for the Morgan Mine. So Judy put it from her mind and in a secluded place among the rocks she had a good swim.

Afterwords she sat for a while in the low, late sun fishing with a battered fly she had brought along and a piece of fishline on a short alder pole. It was nice here, and typical of Judy that she would go to the creeks when in trouble.

She reckoned she would die if she ever had to live in a flat, dry country, just wither up and blow away like a tumble weed. Then a big cutthroat trout rose to the fly. Judy yanked it out and strung it up on a forked stick and went after another. This was a beauty that would weigh a good six pounds.

Judy became so engrossed in her fishing darkness crept up on her and it was night before she left the rock with one more big cutthroat dangling from the stick. She moved gingerly along through the thick brush lining the creek. The fine odor of coffee drifted up with the cool night airs as Judy stepped into the clearing where she could see the small fire gleaming beside the big wagons. She whistled so that Dan would not shoot her for a prowling Indian and ran across the grassy meadow where the mules and horses were picketted.

The men had arranged a comfortable seat for Vivian with the cushion from her buckboard. The dutch ovens were in the coals and Judy could see that the coffee had boiled over at least once. Dan Carter was furious. Vivian had her nose at a tilt, and Mister Morgan seemed mildly amused as if he was not really a part of this scene but was looking on it from a distince.

Judy held up the fish for them to admire. Mister Morgan nodded, But Dan said angrily: "We've been waitin' supper on you. Look—" he was hunkered down beside the fire tapping at the palm of his hand with a finger as if counting something—"we've got six more days ahead of us. You going to do the cooking—or not?"

"Not—of course," Judy said evenly. Vivian's blue eyes began to show interest. Dan's face reddened. "I'm swamper of this outfit—not the cook," Judy continued. "Once we get camp pitched and the mules picketted my job's done." With that she went over to the chuck box for a knife.

Vivian let go with a little squeal. "But I've never—" she cried. "Besides—I'm a passenger. I—"

Judy turned her back on the group by the fire. She carried her fish and a lighted lantern to the river's edge. There she quickly cleaned the fish. She rinsed them

and laid them on some leaves to drain. When she heard the man moving up on her she calmly turned to face him and saw that it was Mister Morgan.

"I liked that," he said. He was smiling, and Judy realized again how handsome he was. She had been calling him Mister to herself all this time because of the elegance of his manner. But he could not be much older than Dan, and it was beginning to occur to her that he probably had more sense than that muleskinner. At least he had not let himself be sucked in by that silly Vivian Cummings. "As a matter of fact," Morgan added, "I've liked you from the moment I saw you, everything about you. You're a woman who would be a mighty real asset to a mining engineer."

Her heart thumped wildly at that. He had called her a woman. Furthermore he had talked to her as if she was someone of importance, not only a youngster to be kicked around or used to do the chores. He did not shout at her like Pa or ignore her like Dan.

"Thanks a lot," she said. "And I like you, too, Mister Morgan." She laughed lightly. "If Dan acts kind of crazy, don't let it worry you. He's confused."

"My name's William," Mister Morgan said. "You can call me Bill. May I call you Judy?"

"Sure," she said. "William—Bill—" She smiled, and she did not mean it that way but somehow she got over the idea that a kiss would be all right. It would cement their friendship. At any rate he moved up closer to her and he kissed her on the lips, very briefly.

Judy did not move away. His trimmed mustache tickled her and sent a little tremor down her spine into her legs, making her knees shake and her bare toes curl in the grass. She did not really know what she was doing or why. It was springtime along the river, dark and warm and mysterious. The peepers were singing their love songs. But there was no one to sing to Judy. Her man was going to marry another girl. Her man thought Judy was just a short pants kid.

Tears welled in her dark eyes to reflect the stars in the blue sky. William Morgan's breath was a soft hiss as he looked down on her. William Morgan was a nice guy and Judy wanted him to kiss her again. She had to learn if kisses were really important—a thing she knew very little about.

"Dan Carter's a fool," William said suddenly, and he took her into his arms. She let her head fall back so the dark hair fell from her shoulders. Then he was kissing her, really kissing her.

She put everything she had into it because she had to know about it. It was surprising how soft, yet firm his mouth was against hers, how hard were the muscles of his arms around her.

But Judy's heart seemed to drop dead now. This thing that she had thought would be so awesome had become almost a little bit messy. She wanted to cry and run to Dan Carter and tell him she was sorry. She had angled for something like this and she had gotten it—and she hated it.

Then suddenly she was wrenched violently out of the man's arms. She was hauled away from him and thrown staggering back into the brush to come to a halt in a clump of alders. When her eyes cleared she saw Dan Carter lacing into Mister Morgan. Dan was battling like a crazy man.

CHAPTER FIVE

This Lady Business!

MORGAN began to retreat. He did not fight the same style as Dan. He was more careful and methodical, showing evidence of having taken lessons in the art of boxing. Though he looked softer than Dan, Judy knew that he was built of spring steel.

Dan, on the other hand, had learned his fighting on the frontier where no one does it for sport. The main object is to kill your man. If you can't do that—maim him.

Morgan eluded Dan, dancing away, wheeling, drawing him up and away from the river. There he suddenly changed from defense to offense. He attacked Dan with such fury the muleskinner was driven into the brush where he could not draw back his arms for a good blow. And while he was pinned there Morgan cut in sharply, smashing at his face and at the pit of his stomach.

Dan took it—then uncorked a terrific blow to Morgan's jaw. Morgan sat down, rolled to his hands and knees, shaking his

head groggily like a wounded bull buffalo.

Dan knew he had won now, and he did not push his attack. He crouched over the mining man like a cougar smelling out the enemy. And as he crouched Judy could hear Vivian Cummings up by the wagons screaming.

The mules were braying crazily, too, and all hell seemed to have broken loose up there. Then the scream was cut short as if it were something like a rope that could be chopped off with a sharp axe. Judy rushed from the place where Dan had flung her in the brush.

"It's a raid," Dan gasped.

"Mister Morgan's gold," Judy cried.

"Forget it," Morgan muttered. "They can have those two sacks. But let's go see what we can do for Miss Cummings."

The three began to run in stumbling fashion through the long grass. Judy had recovered the knife with which she had been cleaning the trout. Dan's rifle and six-shooter were at the wagons. Only the mining engineer had a gun, a short-barrelled, small-calibred pistol he carried in his coat pocket. It tallied up as hardly sufficient armament for battling a raiding party.

Then suddenly Judy remembered something that had completely missed her before. She grabbed Dan and pulled him to a stop. Morgan joined them. At the camping place pandemonium was still king, indicating that the raiders were looting. The fire had been scattered, leaving it too dark there for anyone to see what was going on.

"When I went fishing," Judy said quickly. "Mule tracks. Two mules. I'll bet, Mister Morgan—Bill—they were Red Mike and that swamper. They didn't go hunting your mine after all. They're after the gold in those bags."

"Sure," Dan said excitedly. "The swamper knew where we'd camp tonight. They could have come down last night. Safer to raid us here than try to take the stuff at the store."

Morgan said angrily: "I don't care about that stuff. Miss Cummings—"

"You go after her," Judy said. "Go up the front way and take a couple shots at them. Me and Dan'll go up the creek—"

She was running before she had finished and Dan was following. They cut a wide circle up to the place where the trail was narrow. With Judy's knife Dan hacked out a couple of good, husky clubs. Then he and the girl hunkered in the alders waiting, listening. They could hear Morgan shooting and yelling.

Dan put an arm around Jury. His breath shot out like a bursting boiler when his hand touched bare skin and he discovered that her shirt tail had been pulled from her pants in the excitement. He jumped away as if he had been stung by an especially virulent bee. Judy laughed.

"Go ahead and laugh," Dan said.

"Okay," Judy said and stopped, wishing he'd put his arm around her again. This was hardly the time or place for it but she wished he would do it right away. She wished he would kiss her, too, because she had to know and soon that the failure of Mister Morgan's kisses was the man and not the act.

But Dan stayed in the brush. "I can't marry Viv," he burst out. "She can't even build a campfire."

Judy was let down again. She had forgotten about Vivian. "You don't want campfires in a parlor," she mocked him. "You want a lady, settin' there, tatting."

"Oh—that!" he said disgustedly. He added: "It's funny. There she is down in the middle of a raid and I'm not even worried about her. I just sort of know those hombres won't hurt her much. Maybe a little scare would even do her some good. What I mean is when the Morgan hombre followed you to the river I just saw red. When I caught the two of you kissing and wheezing—"

"We were not wheezing," Judy said angrily. Then she remembered the rules in her book and added more quietly. "You were worried because I am only a little bitty short-pants kid who shouldn't be kissed except by uncles and so on."

"You say that again," he threatened, "and I'll whup you until you're black and blue."

"Try it," she challenged.

He moved toward her again, then crouched. A couple of mules were trotting down the narrow trail.

Judy took the swamper and Dan took Red Mike. They took them just like that. Completely unaware of an ambush these two men rode right into it. Judy tapped the leading mule across the shin and that animal was loaded down so heavily that he

went to his knees in terror. Then Judy went up on her toes to put all her strength into that club as she swung it two-handed on the swamper.

She got him on the back of the neck with a soggy thump. He grunted, passed out cold and rolled laxly from the saddle. The mule staggered up but Judy caught the reins and fought him to a standstill. Then she brought him back to where Dan was waiting for her on the trail. He had a mule, too, and a man stretched out at the edge of the brush.

They hoisted their unconscious men onto the jittery mules to lead them out of the timber. Mister Morgan had pulled the fire together, throwing on brush to build a big light. Vivian's fancy outfit had been torn up a little to reveal a very soft bit of white shoulder. Her mouth looked bruised as if the man who had stifled her scream had done so with violence.

But Judy thought these things made Vivian look prettier than ever. The fright and excitement had made her more real and less like something out of that book Judy had been studying. At that instant Judy decided to throw the book away the moment she got back to the store.

Dan was grinning broadly, proud of what he had done that night.

Vivian glanced at him fearfully.

Dan pushed the two captives to the ground and tied them up securely.

Morgan helped him. "The girl's scared to death," he said. "I say, Dan, maybe we better take her back to her father. I could do that. Keep you on your schedule. Just a little jaunt down there in the buckboard tomorrow morning. You can take this gravel up to the fort and ship it to my company. I'd sure be much obliged, Dan."

Dan tested the knots to make sure they would hold.

Red Mike, who had regained consciousness, said disgustedly: "Gravel?"

"Low grade ore not worth more than fifty cents a sack," the mining dude laughed. "Just a sample for laboratory use. My company's working out a way of recovering the gold in it by dredging."

Red Mike began to swear. Dan hauled him away from the fire where he could cuss plenty without offending Vivian. But the doctor's daughter followed him. Judy watched Vivian for a second then took a deep, shuddery breath.

She said to Morgan: "I'm starved, Bill. I'm going to see if I can find my fish. How about getting the coffee boiling while I'm looking for those trouts?"

Morgan's eyes were veiled. He understood. She knew he did.

"Be glad to," he said.

Judy found her fish where she had left them on the fresh green leaves beside the lantern that still burned dimly. She hunkered down, watching the stars dancing on the rippled river, and began to cry. When she heard Dan blundering through the brush she told him to go away.

"Beat it," she said.

Dan said: "Your friend Morgan said you wanted to talk to me."

She put the lantern behind her so she could see him. His eyes were shadowed but his wide mouth trembled. Mister Morgan, she reckoned, understood a lot more about her than she had thought he did. He must have known all along that she was in love with Dan.

(Please continue on page 97)

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SENORITA DARK EYES

By Thelma Knoles

Lovely Benedicta made lively plans to surprise her sweetheart and his cantina-dancer lady friend at the forbidden fiesta.

IT WAS just after sundown when Benny quietly opened the front door of the big ranchhouse and slipped inside. A fine thing, she thought, her brown eyes sparkling with indignation, when Benedicta Renshaw had to sneak into her own home like a fugitive from the owlhoot trail!

"Concha!" she called, starting down the hall. "Have you pressed my dress?"

"Howdy, Miss." The deep, pleasant voice caught her as she came even with the open door of the living room.

Benny whirled to look into the room, lit by the first glow of the sunset flaming beyond the western windows. "Who—who are you?"

A tall, rangy man stood regarding her with keen interest. The sunset light shone bright on his close-cropped russet hair. He was darkly tanned and lean and powdered with trail dust. He might have been just another cowboy drifting through.

But Benny knew immediately that he was different. He's after something, she thought, and he means to get it come hell or high water. The very set of his broad shoulders silhouetted against the bright light showed tenseness, guarded power.

Then he smiled, a warm, direct smile that took Benny right into his heart. As she returned his smile Benny thanked her stars that she'd spent the long afternoon at Concha's little home in washing and setting her hair so that it fell to her shoulders now in a shower of light brown, golden-edged curls.

"I'm Syd Russel," the stranger explained. "The sheriff's expecting me."

Benny widened her lovely dark eyes. Howard Brooks had said they looked like black-fringed pansies that way.

"But Dad's office is in Dos Pueblos."

"Hey, Juan," came a bellow from outside. "Take my horse. I see that hombre got here—"

"There's Dad now," Benny said hastily. "Listen, don't tell him that you saw me. Please!" She stepped close enough to see that his eyes were a deep, smoky blue, a fact that she filed away to think about later. Now she whispered breathlessly, "There's a masquerade fiesta in Dos Pueblos this evening and I don't want *anyone* to know I'm going." She smiled full up into his eyes. "Savvy?"

Heavy footsteps shook the porch floor. Benny fled, a slim figure in a childish pink cotton dress, with her golden-brown curls flying back.

Concha was waiting in Benny's room. As she helped Benny into a long dress she protested darkly, "Eet not good. Your papa send you in to Nogales and you not go."

Benny gave a supple wriggle that settled the black bodice snugly around her waist and the graceful curve of her hips. She flashed an admiring glance down at the bare ankles and stepped into black satin slippers with spiky, rhinestone crusted heels.

Her red lips quirked as she reflected that there'd been a flare of interest that amounted to definite promise in Syd Russel's smoky blue eyes as he nodded his promise to keep her presence secret. She wondered if he'd attend the fiesta when he finished his business with her father. She hoped he would. Then she'd show Howard Brooks a thing or two for sure.

Concha muttered, as Benny deftly piled her shining curls high on her head: "Ees not good not to mind the papa."

He said very quietly: "It's *me* you're taking this pasear with, lady."

"Fiddlesticks!" Benny retorted. Her eyes sparkled as she applied paste rouge to her lips. "Maria Flores told me she saw Aunt Di in Nogales only yesterday, and Aunt Di is no more sick than I am. Furthermore she doesn't expect me in and was planning a shopping trip to Tucson." She screwed on a pair of dangling earrings. "My scaredy-cat old Dad is looking for trouble at that fiesta tonight. Likely he expects a holdup with all that big money those dudes are planning on flashing at the roulette tables."

"He ees right to look for trouble and try to get you away," Concha insisted. "Juan says they are asking to be hold up, those rich gringos."

"I'm not going to be around the roulette tables," Benny said lightly. "I have other fish to fry."

"You better leave that feesh alone, Mees Benny," Concha advised bluntly, "and you make more sure of catching heem, I theenk."

Benny was carefully draping a lacy mantilla over her hair, anchoring it with glittering combs. She drew a corner of the filmy shawl across her face, pinned it so that only her brilliant dark eyes showed.

"Ah," she announced triumphantly, "there'll be more than one glamorous senorita at that fiesta tonight. We'll lead Mr. Brooks a merry dance."

"Lola ees a dangerous woman," Concha warned.

But Benny was opening the door, was tiptoeing out into the hall. She stopped a moment to listen to the rumble of her father's voice from the living room.

"My deputy, Brooks," Sheriff Renshaw was saying, "will stick around the town tonight."

Yes, thought Benny, gritting her teeth as she slipped out the kitchen door and sped toward the barn where Juan was to have the buggy ready. Howard Brooks would stick around town tonight all right—very close to Lola.

The thought of Howard, with his laughing hazel eyes and dashing good looks, sent the warm color to her cheeks. She believed him when he said he loved her, that he'd fallen for her hard the day he took the job as her father's deputy. She couldn't help believing that, remembering the way his eyes lit up at the sight of her and the compliments he showered on her as they danced, or rode the desert trails together.

But since Lola came to dance at the cantina in town two weeks ago Howard had broken more than one date with Benny. And when her father packed her off to Nogales to stay with a supposedly ailing Aunt Di the week-end of the masquerade fiesta in the little border town, Howard had been too agreeable about it.

A furious Benny had made Juan turn the buckboard about as soon as they were out of sight of the ranchhouse. She'd gone to Concha's little home and waited, making her own plans to attend the masquerade. She'd give Howard Brooks the shock of his confident life. And now, how much better she could do just that with the help of a tall, russet-haired stranger with smoky blue eyes. Surely he'd come to the Fiesta.

DOS PUEBLOS was aflame with life. Benny walked along the streets mingling with the gayly-customed crowds, catching the excitement that throbbed through the music form the band blaring in the plaza, buring in inviting glances and reckless laughter. Cowboys and caballeros, bandidos and dance-hall girls, Spanish Dons and Indian maidens met and mingled in such an universal abandon to the spirit of fiesta that no one could tell the make-believe from the real visiting dudes or natives.

Benny moved lightly along, one more graceful, beguiling senorita attracting more than her share of admiration. Finally she caught a glimpse of Howard, unmistakable in bright rodeo rig, wearing a ten-gallon hat that couldn't hide his curly blond hair. Panic and excitement surged through her.

She followed him through the crowd, to the very edge of town. When she reached the last row of lanterns strung across the road Howard was still striding ahead, toward the cottonwoods that loomed darkly along the river bank.

Benny paused, her heart beating fast and her breath fluttering from her lips. She stood hesitant, torn by anger and doubt. She could follow him no farther alone. She turned, her flounced skirt rustling around her ankles, and uttered a startled gasp.

"Evening, Senorita," came an eager greeting.

She caught her breath and looked up at the man's face, shadowed by a wide, flat Spanish hat. The short, silver-trimmed jacket of a Mexican caballero's costume set off a pair of broad, powerful shoulders, and a tightly-wound silken sash showed a lithe, flat waist.

"Looking for someone?" the caballero asked.

There was nothing offensive about his tone or manner. Instead it was distinctly familiar. Benny moved so that she could catch the confident, almost bold set of those shoulders against the lantern light. Then she knew beyond any doubt that this *was* Syd Russel. Triumph ran singing through her veins. He had come to the Fiesta. She felt confident and daring.

She signed softly. "I was looking for a —friend," she admitted. "But I'm afraid I've lost him."

She smiled invitingly up at the tall caballero. Lantern light glimmered in the mysterious depths of her dark eyes.

"Maybe, Senorita, I can help you search," he offered promptly. "This crowd is no place for a lady alone."

"Let's walk along the river bank," Benny suggested, the words blurring with the reckless excitement she felt.

It seemed to her that her companion's shoulders stiffened. Then he caught her arm in a light grip. They walked toward the rustling cottonwoods.

Benny's cheeks were burning and her throat felt dry and tight. Howard was down there. There could be only one reason why he'd slip away from the crowd and lights, and that would be a rendezvous with Lola. She had to know for sure. Howard wouldn't recognize her, a slender senorita strolling along arm in arm with a tall cabellero in the whispering darkness beside the murmuring river, with the scent of willow blossoms and even primrose sweet around them.

Her steps quickened and she peered ahead into the dense shadows. Then unmistakably she heard a light giggle and Howard's pleading voice: "Lola."

Lola! Anger flamed through Benny. Howard had claimed to be so sorry because he couldn't join her in Nogales. How he'd regretted that his job would keep him at Dos Pueblos on Fiesta night. Job, indeed!

Benny started forward with the one thought of confronting him with his hypocrisy. She was checked by Syd Russel's grip on her arm. She tried to free herself and his fingers closed together. She turned to face him.

He said very quietly, "It's *me* you're taking this pasear with, Lady."

Over his shoulder she caught a glimpse of two figures moving into a clearing along the bank. The moonlight glinted on Howard's bright rodeo shirt, shot stars from a spangled fan spread coquettishly against the curve of his companion's cheek.

Benny struggled furiously. She broke free and took a step after Howard and Lola who'd disappeared again under the trees. Then she turned and looked back at Syd Russel. His hat had been tilted back during their short struggle and she saw an expression of pity and scorn on his face, as he looked after her.

Instant protest snapped Benny's head erect and squared her slim shoulders. Why, he couldn't look at her like that, no man could!

With two swift strides he was beside her. "Just beyond the bridge, Senorita," he said softly, "I have a rig waiting. The moonlight on the mesa is very lovely this evening. Would you like to ride?"

Before Benny could reply he was drawing her along beside him. She could feel the hard strength of his body through the silver-trimmed jacket, as he pressed her arm close to his side. They walked so fast that she was breathless.

But she kept seeing that expression of mingled pity and scorn revealed by the moonlight striking full on his face, and she knew she'd have to do something immediately to change his opinion of her. At the moment that was more important than anything Howard had done.

Anyhow she never would have really spoken to Howard and Lola. She'd have turned back before facing them, no matter how stormy her emotions. But she'd have to make this tall, purposeful stranger see that, too, and pronto.

"Must we—walk—so fast?" she gasped, stumbling as they stepped onto the wooden bridge that spanned the twisted, silvery ribbon that was the Santa Luz River by moonlight.

"Sorry," he said instantly. He looked down at her and his eyes narrowed in sur-

prise at the radiant smile that Benny flashed up at him. "Maybe," he suggested, with a husky break in his voice that set Benny's pulses to racing, "it'd be easier this way."

He swept her into his arms and strode across the bridge, his footsteps sounding loud on the planking. Sounding to Benny like the loud, hammering blows of her own heart against her ribs. Her bright smile wavered. She had a moment of panic.

Then she reminded herself that he was really no stranger. That he'd come to her home at her father's own invitation that evening. She remembered the confidential tone of her father's voice rumbling from the living room as she tiptoed down the hall.

And it was comforting to think that if things got out of hand she had only to sweep the concealing mantilla from her head and reveal herself as Sheriff Renshaw's daughter. But she had a feeling it wouldn't be necessary. Everything about Syd Russel inspired her trust. To save her own special brand of pride she'd simply have to convince him that she was no tempestuous little firebrand, jealous of the cantina dancer, but that this was all a mad, gay escapade—part of the fiesta. Later they'd laugh together about her successful masquerade.

"Of course," she murmured now, letting her head snuggle into the curve of his shoulder, "I was only *pretending* to be upset back there by the river."

"Sure," he said briefly. "I savvy that."

HE STOPPED beside a buggy tied to a low hanging branch of a cottonwood. Benny laughed as he lifted her to the seat. After all it was fiesta time. The autumn moon hung redgold and full over the hazy outline of the Huachucas. Very faintly came the music from Dos Pueblos, softened into something unreal and poignant.

She settled her misty skirts around her and darted a quick glance at her companion as he gathered up the reins. He stared straight ahead at the moon-washed stretches of cholla and sagebrush. Benny sighed. She loosened the mantilla so that it fell back from her face in lacy folds.

Her mouth was soft and deeply red. Her lashes cast fringed shadows on her cheeks. She laid her head back against the seat and waited till she felt Syd Russel's questioning gaze on her face. Then she sighed again. Her quickened breathing showed in the fluttering pulse at the base of her throat.

It would be much easier to convince Syd Russel that Howard Brooks meant nothing to her *after* he'd—well, become a little more interested in her himself.

But Syd flipped the reins smartly and the buggy started with a jolt. Benny clutched the edge of the seat and flung him a surprised glance. He was staring ahead, frowning, studying the road as though looking for the cut-off to the old Myers place down in Cold Springs Hollow.

When he came to the faintly marked cut-off and turned across the mesa Benny couldn't help protesting that there was no view at all down that way. Syd muttered something into the wind and urged the horse to greater speed. Shortly he pulled up in front of the dark windowed little adobe shack.

He swung Benny to the ground. "Now, don't get scared," he said rapidly, half-lifting her up the steps and onto the porch. "No one's going to bother you out here. I'm bunking here myself for the time being."

He pushed open the door, still holding her arm. Then he released her to light a lamp. Benny wasn't afraid. She was puzzled and angry. Angrier by the second. She demanded, "Are you crazy?"

"No, but I'm in too damn much of a hurry to explain anything now." He glanced swiftly around the room with its bare pine table, its neatly made bunk and two chairs. "You just stay quiet here till I come back."

"I'll certainly do nothing of the kind!" Benny's protest sputtered out as her shoulders were caught in a hard grasp.

"Meantime this is to help you forget that hombre back in Dos Pueblos," said Syd Russel swiftly, with a hurried sort of savagery in his tone.

He jerked her close, kissed her full on the lips—a hard, possessive kiss that left her senses awhirl and her whole being suspended in expectancy. "Sigh over that awhile," he said. Then he put her aside and strode to the door. It slammed after him and the lock clicked sharply.

Benny stared blankly at the door, vaguely hearing the sound of the buggy wheels on gravel, the diminishing clop-clop of the horses' hooves. Then she could hear nothing but the night sounds around an old, rundown ranch, and she came to sudden life.

The one window was small and high from the ground, but that offered no real obstacle to a girl who was as strong and active as a young wildcat, and as rebellious at being locked up. She snatched the top blanket from the bunk and tore it into long strips, taking a savage pleasure in the ripping sound. The strips knotted together made a strong rope with which it was easy to lower herself to the ground.

Even in her high-heeled slippers it wasn't too hard, though it did take time, to catch the lazy old mare in the corral near the barn. She tied the end of her lacy shawl under her chin, hitched the skirt high above her knees and rode bareback to the river, never meeting a soul along the way. And she wouldn't have cared if she had, she was so blazingly angry.

At the bridge she dismounted and tied the mare to a cottonwood. She rearranged the mantilla so that it concealed the lower part of her face, smoothed the dress down around her hips, and walked swiftly toward the lights of the town.

She moved into a cluster of excitedly-talking people. Without warning a man caught her arm and yelled, "Here's one of them! Here's the dancer sneaking back!"

"Hold her! shouted another.

"Where's yore pardner? came a woman's shrill cry.

Benny tried to escape the clutching hands but her captors closed in on her. Her frightened protests were lost in the uproar. The mantilla was ripped from her face.

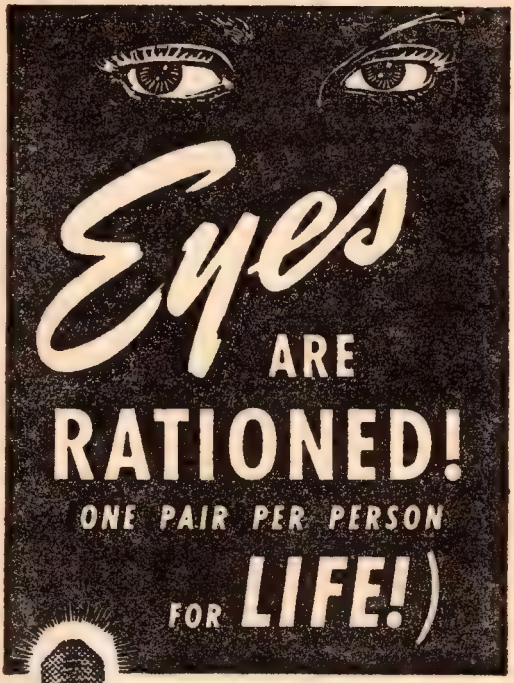
Then a familiar voice reached her, a strong arm went around her and Howard Brooks was angrily pushing the shouting crowd back.

"Leave her alone, you fools! Can't you see this is Sheriff Renshaw's daughter?"

Benny clung limply to his arm. "What's the matter?" she gasped. "Are they crazy?"

"No," Howard explained jerkily, pushing a way through the staring, muttering mob that was still gathering. "There's been a hold up."

He led her into a vine-covered arbor at



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one side of the plaza. "Are you all right, Benny?" he demanded, jerking a bandana from his pocket and wiping his face with shaking hands.

She nodded. He was staring at her dress. "Yep," he explained swiftly, "there was a big hold up. That—dancer—from the cantina and a masked bandit got away with thousands raked in from the gambling tables." His fascinated stare traveled up to her shawled head. "No wonder they mistook you for Lola." He broke off and asked sharply, "What're you doing here, anyhow, Benny? Your father sent you in to Nogales."

Benny was still trembling with shock. She stared at Howard in horror. "You mean that—Lola was siding a holdup man?"

Howard winced. He mumbled, "Seems they work together." Suddenly he bent down, straightened and held out a lace fan. "Here, you must have dropped this."

Automatically Benny took it. She was rapidly regaining her composure.

"Benny," Howard said, speaking with desperate urgency, "it wasn't my fault they got away with this."

Benny opened the fan in her hand. A sequined butterfly spread its swings across the gauzy background. "Where were *you* all the time?" she asked.

"Looking for you," Howard replied. He caught Benny's wrist in a tight grasp. "I had a hunch you'd slip away from your aunt's and come here. I was worried about you. You have to make your dad see that I was looking for you, Benny."

"So you weren't with Lola tonight?" Benny demanded, anger flaring through her. "She didn't meet you down by the river and keep you there on some pretext while her partner pulled a gun on the roulette tables?" She concluded scornfully, "A fine deputy you are."

Howard laughed. "You're just jealous, baby." He tried to draw her close, but Benny held the opened fan up to her face, against the curve of her cheek.

"Is this the way Lola does it, Howard?" she asked coolly. She thrust the fan into his hands. "You know that it isn't mine. You're just in a panic to get rid of it. So, she left you holding her fan while she and her partner pulled a hold up." Contempt sharpened her voice. "And likely she's been pumping you for all you knew about my father's plans to protect this fiesta."

Her wild shots found their mark. The forced, nervous laughter faded from Howard's face. He swung his arms out and caught her in a tight grip.

"Shut up!" he whispered frantically. Then, more quietly, "If anyone saw me down by the river tonight I'll swear I was with you." There was a hard shine to his eyes and his mouth had thinned to a tight line. "So you were snooping around, dressed like Lola. Well, it's a damn lucky break for me."

Benny stood very still, her breath a searing pain in her throat. Syd Russel could prove that she'd not been with Howard that evening. But where was Syd? And *who* was he? Who was the tall, purposeful stranger who'd ridden out of the sunset to meet Sheriff Renshaw at his home instead of in his office in town?

Why had he locked her in a deserted cabin and ridden swiftly away on some mysterious business? Unwelcome thoughts of Lola and her bandit partner rose to torment Benny.

She shut her teeth hard against the faintness that threatened to overwhelm her. If Syd Russel never came back to redeem the promise of that swift, hard kiss in the cabin at Cold Springs, she didn't care what happened. If his warm, magnetic smile was false, then everything was false.

"You savvy that?" Howard asked sharply. "No one'll ever doubt that I was with you down by the river tonight."

"I reckon," came a cool drawl from the entrance to the arbor, "that I'd doubt it."

Howard flung Benny away from him. He snatched at his holster, but Syd Russel's even, cold voice stopped him.

"Don't get hasty, hombre."

It seemed to Benny that the broad figure aureoled in the light of the lantern hanging at the arbor entrance must be a dream. But his voice was very real and steady.

"You'll find the sheriff down at the courthouse with his prisoners, if you want to report to him, Brooks," Syd suggested.

Howard vanished. Syd came toward Benny. He reached out and caught the edge of the lacy mantilla, yanked it from her hair which tumbled to her shoulders, glinting golden brown.

"That damn thing's been bothering me

all evening," he remarked. Then the coolness left his voice and he demanded hotly, "So, you had to come stampedin' back to hunt for your philanderin', curly-haired Romeo." He regarded her bitterly. "Taking care of you I was almost late closing in on those bandits. But I had a hunch you'd trail after Brooks, and with him sticking close to Lola you'd have been smack in the way of some likely gunfire."

Benny said faintly, "You—you were helping my father set a trap for those bandits?"

He glared down at her. "Yes. I'm from down toward Mount Roja. That thieving pair of coyotes cleaned out my father's bank. I was appointed a special officer to help track them down. We suspected the girl. Your dad told me that she'd been making up to Brooks. So we let him think we were guarding all trails south, and that Huachuca Pass would be safe." He added significantly, "That's where we caught them."

A great happiness welled up in Benny. She smiled at him radiantly. She said shakily. "Howard isn't really crooked."

"No," Syd Russel snapped. "He just fell for a pretty dancer and talked too much." He added savagely, "So if that's the kind you like I reckon your dad will let him off this time. I'll be clearing out, so this is adios."

He caught her up to him. His head came down and he planted a swift, hard kiss on her lips. Benny's arms lifted, closed tight around his shoulders.

"Howard's *not* the kind I'd like, permanently," she murmured against a hard, smooth cheek. "And—and back there at the cabin you s-said something about helping me forget—"

Syd shook her clinging fingers from his shoulders. He caught her chin in his strong hand, turned her face so that the lantern light shone full into her eyes.

"I reckon," he said, after a moment, "that I'll be making a lifetime job out of that."

This time his kiss was as warm and sweet, as completely taking her into his heart, as his smile had been.

THE BACK-TRAIL

By Harriet A. Bradfield

I love a lanky cowboy
With a tantalizing grin,
Who claims there is no trail
He cannot follow in.

But one road he's not looked for;
Perhaps it is too dim—
That little path my heart makes
Running after him.

No use corralling my heart;
It breaks from any pen.
But some day it will rope him
And lead him back again!

GO WEST FOR YOUR MAN!

By Sophie Ellis

When vibrant Marta met Noah Conrad she knew that she would have to come out of her shell of indifference and match wits and kisses with a soft, cuddly, starry-eyed belle.

MARTA'S cheeks were flushed with excitement as she gazed eagerly at the sagebrush rolling by the smoke-blurred windows. The little town around the bend in the tracks, with the backdrop of purple mountains, was Midas, where a new life waited for her.

She did not have to reach into her silk handbag for Doc Henry's letter to refresh herself on that one sentence which had brought her West. It had said: *A big, strong girl like you who understands practical nursing is needed here as much as miners and muckers. Come out and help me with my patients, Marta.*

"He doesn't make me seem very romantic," she grinned, looking down at the long line of her legs faintly limned under her full skirts. Back in Kentucky, popular girls were little and cut—precious things done up in small packages. Men didn't seem to fall in love with a girl who could look straight into their eyes when they waltzed.

Doc Henry, a confirmed bachelor, who had lived in Turfton before going West to set up his practice, knew why Marta Dune had been called upon often to sit up with sick old ladies and croupish kids.

"I wasn't kept busy stepping out," she thought cheerfully.

She could be light-hearted over her beauless state now. But it hadn't been funny back in Kentucky.

"After all, I'm nearly twenty-two," she mused.

The yellow railroad station came into view. Hunkered almost between the knees of a mountain, the smelting furnace at the edge of town belched out black smoke clouds.

Here was a big, lusty country, where men wouldn't want their women heart-high and cuddly. Marta was aware that a Westerner had noticed her already. Across the aisle, a swarthy-faced man with a very black moustache had turned twice to observe her with open interest.

She took a deep, satisfying breath. The old, pinched life of a girl who had outlived her welcome in the home of an aunt and uncle was behind her now.

The train crawled to a snorting stop. The hot odor of metal rails, black grease and escaping steam rolled into the coach. Marta stood up and reached in the rack for her valise. On her feet, she was a slender, straight-backed figure with something in the set of her head like a spirited filly's.

"What beautiful hands that tall girl has," a woman said audibly.

Marta flushed with pleasure. Her graceful, long-fingered hands were her only claim to beauty. She was proud of them, always sleeping in gloves to preserve their moonflower whiteness.

"Let me help you, girlie," said an eager masculine voice behind her.

The bold, flashing dark eyes on the man who had been staring at her were close to her face now. After he had lifted down the bag, he retained it.

"I'll take it out for you, girlie."

Marta had to accept his help, because those behind pushed her toward the door.

Marta responded with all the tenderness she had been saving. . . .

"I'm the only young white woman getting off the train," she thought, looking with interest at the Indian squaws and the leathery-faced wives of miners and ranchers.

Then she saw the girl with the honey-colored curls, standing heart-high to a young man in ranch clothes. The girl was as little and cute as any Kentucky belle.

The man's smoothly fitting denims revealed the magnificent length of his muscular body. The sunlight making shining stars of the rowels on his spurs also emphasized the good red blood in his deeply tanned cheeks.

"Darn!" breathed Marta.

Here was the very type of Westerner she had wanted to know. And he was so enthralled with that pretty little package he didn't even glance her way.

The man who had taken her valise was out of the coach now, coming toward her with a determined look in his bright black eyes.

"Where you headed, girlie?" he inquired. "I'll take your luggage all the way for you."

"No, you won't, Ricardo!" drawled a voice close to Marta's ear. "I'm takin' care of Miss Dune."

Marta's red, generously wide mouth sagged in astonishment as she looked into the face of the tall young man who had been with the blond girl. His eyes were gray, long, and knife-sharp as they slashed at the man he had called Ricardo.

"I guess the lady sent for you?" Ricardo asked, still holding on to the valise.

"Oh, please!" put in Marta. "I'm supposed to be met by Doctor Henry. But I don't see him." She stretched even taller to look over the heads around her.

"He sent me in his place, Ma'am." The young man's voice was a little bashful, and he jerked off his broad-brimmed hat, exposing a tousled crop of moist brown masculine curls and the fairer line of his forehead which the hat had protected from the sun.

A sudden throb leaped out of Marta's heart and coursed through her veins. She tried to say something, but the words stuck in her throat. The milling crowd around the train seemed to disappear in a haze that closed her in alone with this sun-singed young man.

"I'm Noah Conrad," he said. "Doc Henry is a little under the weather, and he asked me to look out for you."

"Ah!" Marta cried in dismay.

So Doc Henry still drank too much. One of his reasons for coming West was to try to overcome his old habit.

She took the crumpled note that Noah Conrad handed her. It was from Doc Henry, urging her to put herself in the good hands of his young friend.

"There's been a fire, Ma'am," Noah Conrad explained, pointing to a row of buildings that had a black, snaggle-toothed break in the center. "The only decent boarding house burned down yesterday. But I have a place fixed up for you."

Marta found herself liking those steady grey eyes that met hers squarely.

Ricardo's voice cut in. "I'll leave you with your cowpoke duenna, girlie. But I'll be seeing you again, I hope."

Noah's hands bunched into two tight fists as Ricardo swung away through the crowd.

"I'll bust that coyote yet," he muttered, adding, "If he ever bothers you, Ma'am, let me know."

"I will," she said, feeling almost heart-high and cuddly.

THEN the pleasant feeling was gone. Noah Conrad asked her to wait, while he loped away with long strides toward the honey-haired girl who now sat mounted on a shining roan mare. The girl's full skirts, trimmed with fancy braid, draped gracefully over the side-saddle.

That side-saddle gave Marta another jolt. She had hoped that all Western girls rode as she did—in a man's stock saddle, wearing shabby jeans.

Noah spoke briefly to the blond girl, who glanced curiously at Marta, a smile on her lips.

"She knows I won't be competition for her, even in this womanless West," Marta thought morosely.

Noah came to her again and lifted the heavy valise that Ricardo had deposited on the ground.

"My buckboard is on the other side of the depot," he said, leading the way.

Marta had one last glimpse of the blond girl. She had started to ride away, but had

paused to talk with Ricardo, who gazed ardently at her as he held her horse.

Noah Conrad frowned stormily. "He thinks he's a lady-killer."

He pushed through the crowd in the waiting room and on into the street on the other side. In the row of dismal buildings Marta spotted Doc Henry's sign over a paint-peeled door next to the Mother Lode saloon. Farther down the street the sunlight bounced gaudily from the upper windows of the Drummer's Hotel.

"Here we are," said Noah, stopping by a buckboard, where a round-faced Mexican boy of about eight sat holding the reins. The child stared at Marta with unblinking eyes.

"Boton won't take up much room," Noah said.

He helped her into the seat and tucked the old buffalo robe around her.

It's goin' to be windy and dusty," he explained.

When he turned the horses away from the sprawling town, she asked:

"Where are we going?"

"To my ranch, Ma'am. The fire left no other place for you until we can find some private family that will take you."

"You're married?" she asked. Her heart lurched and paused.

"Not yet." He laughed with that attractive embarrassment she had noted before. "But I soon will be."

A sickening wash of disappointment rolled through her. Ever since she had passed her sixteenth birthday, she had never become interested in a man without finding that he belonged to a little wide-eyed bit of fluff.

Noah was saying gently, "You needn't be uneasy about goin' to the ranch of a bachelor, ma'am. The elderly lady whose boarding house burned yesterday is bunkin' with us."

She turned to give him a reassuring smile, liking the strong set of his jaw.

"It's good of you to help me out," she said, her long, lovely hands fingering the cameo brooch at her round throat.

It wasn't a gesture of knowing coquetry, but it was very effective. His gray eyes seemed absorbed in that soft, white, pink-palmed girl-hand.

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The boy said shyly: "She has hands like the white cactus blossom, *padre.*"

Noah laughed and gave him a look of deep affection. "Botón and me are like a catch rope and a throwed calf."

The boy grinned proudly at him. "If your new wife don't want me to stay, I'll show her how I can find strayed calves."

Marta caught the lost look in Noah's eyes.

"Botón's ma and pa died of slow fever when he was four years old. Him and me have been batchin' together ever since."

"You mean you've taken care of this little button?"

"We've taken care of each other."

Marta looked down at the small figure huddled beside her. She could see that the patch in his knee must have been sewn by those same big brown hands that held the driving reins. She smiled tenderly at the awkward length of the crooked stitches. How lonely he must have been to care for this waif in his womanless home!

I mustn't let myself keep finding new things about him to like!

SHE turned her eyes resolutely to the scenery. It was beautiful country. A narrow, swift-flowing little river curved through luxuriant sage. She took a deep breath, enjoying the pungent smell of the blossoms that laid purple haze over the waist-high shrubs.

Her eyes were shining when she said, "This country is wonderful."

"That's what I think," he agreed. "I'd rather have my ranch than all the gold in Wolf Fang mountains."

They forded the river. The wet wheels of the buckboard splashed Marta's dress. But she did not cringe from the spray. Her eager eyes were focused on the house that was a startling whiteness against the dark mountains behind it.

"It's painted!" she exclaimed.

"I had to make it a little citified for Nancy," he said.

"You'd want everything nice for such a pretty bride," she said, hoping she did not sound envious.

Botón said solemnly, "She made him put a pump in the kitchen. And when she comes here to live, I'll have to sleep in the bunkhouse all the time."

"Hush, pard!"

Noah reached across Marta to tap the boy's shoulder. But the few words the little fellow had spoken had told her much. Her eyes were full of pity as she looked at him.

Botón had something of the appeal of a sad-eyed pup. Marta tucked the buffalo robe around him, and her arm lingered behind the small shoulders. He leaned back instantly.

As they drove toward the house, the setting sun struck the window glass in a flash of orange fire. Marta had a strange feeling of peace, as though she were coming home after a long journey. The boy's black head cuddled against her arm, and the strong-jawed man at her side seemed like a permanent part of her life.

She made herself say resolutely, "Nancy ought to be very happy here."

Noah sighed. "She wants me to sell to that fellow Ricardo. He things there's gold in the mountains that cross my two thousand acres."

"Do you think so?"

"I'm not carin'. I'm not turnin' my home into a gold camp. And there can't be any prospectin' here because I have a good title, includin' mineral rights. So I'll personally do any minin' that's done here."

His square jaw seemed solid bone as he bit off the words. Marta felt suddenly all hollow and lost inside. How glorious it would be to share a home like this with a man who loved it more than all the gold in Wolf Fang mountains!

The buckboard stopped, and Marta got out before Noah could help her. A motherly-looking woman came out on the little front porch, and Noah introduced her as Mrs. Dawson, owner of the boarding house that had burned.

"And you're Doc Henry's nurse," she said, looking over the girl's tall figure with approval in her faded eyes. "You're needed here, dearie."

Noah's deep voice drawled out: "Wouldn't mind gettin' sick myself."

"Me, too," chimed in Botón.

Mrs. Dawson accompanied Marta to the bedroom, where a second shabby old bed had been lined up beside the massive four-poster that obviously belonged to the room.

"You take the bride's bed, dearie," she said. I'll sleep in the other."

Marta felt the hot color mount into her cheeks. "How long will I have to make myself a nuisance on his hands?"

"Doc Henry will come for you in the morning. But you'll probably have to come back here for a night or two. I'm staying for a few days, gettin' the house ready for the bride."

Marta's eyes strayed to the homespun curtains folded neatly on a chair. What a joy it would be to keep this sweet little house.

Mrs. Dawson chatted on garrulously. "That girl he's marrying will never spend her life on a ranch. She came here with her pa from the East. He's a mining engineer, bent on gettin' rich out here."

Marta changed to a sprigged challis house dress with pretty sleeves that frilled just below her elbow.

AFTER the appetizing supper that she and Mrs. Dawson had cooked was cleared away, the cozy kitchen was turned into a sitting room. Botón brought out a battered copy of *Black Beauty*. "Read to me, *padre,*" he asked, looking appealingly at Noah.

"I'll bet Marta would like to do that tonight," he said.

She took the book and settled in a chair close to the lamp, conscious of Noah's strong-jawed face as he sat smoking in the shadows by the stove.

Mrs. Dawson went to bed, leaving the big, homey room, with its bright red pump and rows of shining pans, to the man, the girl, and the child.

While Marta read, she let happiness curl warmly around her. The cuckoo clock ticked lazily. The brass kettle on the back of the stove simmered. This was home. This was the comfortable way a married couple felt.

She turned a page of the book, and glanced up to see that Noah was looking at her arms, round and graceful under the soft frills at the elbow. The shaded lamplight emphasized the curve of her tight basque and the rich young redness of her mouth.

"You two look mighty pretty together," Noah said gravely.

Don't get notions, Marta, she warned herself.

Closing the book hastily, she laid her long, lovely hand on Botón's head. "Bedtime, fella."

She stood up, a tall, plain-faced girl with hands as beautiful as dream flowers.

"Good night, Noah."

"Good night, Marta."

As she went from the room, she heard Botón say:

"*Padre,* this one wouldn't make me sleep in the bunkhouse."

* * *

Marta had scarcely finished drying the breakfast dishes when she heard a vehicle stop in front and a hearty voice shout:

"Where's Marta?"

Marta hurriedly dried her hands and ran out. Doc Henry, a rotund, florid-faced man of forty, was helping Nancy from his shabby buckboard.

"Doggone, if it isn't my girl!" He seized both of Marta's hands. "And you still have the healing hand—soft as silk, strong and pretty."

He stood looking at her with great liking in his tired eyes, now a little bloodshot and puffy-lidded.

He introduced Nancy, who had been waiting expectantly, a bright pink satin bedspread folded across her arm.

"Nancy ran out with me to bring some fancy fixings for the bride's house, Doc said.

"I'm trying to make this ugly ranch house livable," Nancy said sweetly, shaking out the gaudy spread for Marta to admire.

"It's right pretty," Marta said flatly, thinking how hideous the elaborate bed cover would be in this simple little home that begged for patchwork quilts and braided rugs.

"Let's see how it's going to look," Nancy suggested, hurrying into the house.

Botón sat straddling a chair, eating a red apple hungrily. Nancy paused, staring at him with frank disapproval.

"Howdy, Miss Nancy," the boy said.

She passed on to the bedroom without speaking. Just as she had finished smoothing the bright satin over the bed, Noah came in, followed by Botón.

"Like it?" she demanded of Noah.

He scratched his head and tilted up an eyebrow. "Looks nice, but I'll bet a tired fellow wouldn't be allowed to rest on it."

Botón seemed completely entranced. His black eyes gloated over the vivid expanse of pink. Moving closer, he stretched out his dark little hand to feel the rich surface.

"Take your dirty hands away!" Nancy snapped, her face convulsed with rage.

She swirled around to face Noah. "When are you going to stop giving him the run of the house?"

Noah's face was white and set. "He can hardly remember any other home, Nancy."

He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Come, fellow."

The two went from the room. Noah soon returned alone.

"Goin' to spend the day?" he asked Nancy, his face softening as he looked deep into the wide blue eyes sweeping up to his.

"I'll have plenty of days here," she said sweetly. "Today I have to shop in town."

Leaving her to say good-by to Noah, Marta went out to the buckboard. She cringed when she imagined the beautiful girl going into Noah's arms.

Doc said bluntly, "I hate to see Noah saddled with her for life."

"She's the sort of girl most men want to marry, Doc Henry."

Doc shook his head. "Men always think they want a girl like that. They usually wind up marrying one like you."

Marta didn't answer.

That first day as Doc Henry's assistant was strenuous. A rock-slide in one of the mines had injured a dozen men. In the Mexican settlement across the railroad tracks, where large families lived in hastily built shacks, a fever epidemic threatened. Many house calls had to be made to change dressings and to check on how Doc's nursing directions were being carried out.

Some of the tired lines in Doc's face smoothed out when he said:

"Don't see how I ever did without you, Marta."

"You should have sent for me sooner, Doc."

Sooner. Just six months sooner she could have known Noah before Nancy had come.

DOC HENRY did not want to take time for lunch, but he insisted upon a good meal for Marta. Just as she was coming out of the Golden Cafe, feeling better after having eaten a big western steak, she saw Nancy. The girl was standing with her back to Marta, talking with Al Ricardo. Neither noticed Marta until she had overheard part of their conversation. Nancy was saying:

"I'll make him sell the ranch to you, Al. He'll never know that my father's money is buying it. We'll go out tonight."

"He's stubborn, girlie. Maybe—"

He saw Marta, and squeezed Nancy's arm in warning.

As Marta walked back to the Mexican settlement, her tall body seethed with indignation.

"I wouldn't dare tell Noah," she thought miserably. Noah was still too much in love with the beautiful little schemer.

While Doc was driving Marta to his office to meet Noah, her sympathy for Noah spilled over.

"Al Ricardo will be on hand tonight to close the sale of the ranch after Nancy gets Noah to the right point," she said indignantly.

"You like that long-legged cowpoke, don't you, Marta?"

"He's been pretty fine to me. Why shouldn't I like him?"

Doc regarded her flushed cheeks and quick breath. "I kind of hoped that you might get a soft feeling for old Doc Henry," he confessed, covering his admission with an embarrassed chuckle. "But you wouldn't like an old sot like me."

"Doc! You're joking, of course."

"Nope. I intended to ask you to marry me when I got you out here. But now this cowpoke of yours has breezed into your life."

"He isn't mine!" She spoke a little too vigorously.

"You're his kind of woman."

He squeezed her hand gently. Then he picked it up, turning over the scrubbed palm that was still beautiful after the long hours of sick-room duties.

"Prettiest woman-hand I've ever seen," he said. "Fight Nancy with it, Marta."

Fight Nancy with it. She thought of Doc's advice when she saw Noah waiting in front of the unpainted frame building where Doc Henry had his office. When Noah began tucking the buffalo robe around her, she leaned back in the seat, enjoying this slight service after a long day of serving others.

"You look fagged as a rider at the end of the trail," he said, concerned.

"I am tired. Let's hurry home."

Home. The words slipped out before she could stop them. She closed her eyes to hide the telltale moisture that gathered between the lids.

"Botón is sick," Noah said. "He felt a little hot to me, but dern if I don't believe he wants some nursin' from you."

She smiled through her weariness. "You put him to bed, I hope."

"Fixed him a pallet on the front room floor. He didn't want to bed down with me in the bunkhouse tonight. Wanted to be close to you."

"Poor little motherless fellow," she said softly, her mouth very tender.

If Noah had been looking at her a few minutes later, he would have observed the new animation that brightened her tired face.

She had a plan now. A plan as wickedly feminine as any heart-high, cuddly girl ever concocted to win a man from another girl.

When she entered the little white house, Botón, lying on a pallet of tossed quilts in the front room, groaned convincingly.

Marta knelt by him and laid her cool hand on his forehead. The slight anxiety in her eyes faded. She struggled to hide a smile.

"I guess you're sick enough to nurse," she said cheerfully, noting the pleased look on the boy's face. "And you ought to have a more comfortable bed."

"He's goin' into the bedroom," Noah said with determination.

He picked up the small figure, and Marta hurried ahead of him, taking the lighted lamp with her.

"Are you going to leave the pink spread on?" Botón asked wistfully.

Noah had started toward the other bed, but he wheeled around.

"Might's well let him have plenty of fun bein' sick." He grinned at Marta. "Turn that spread down."

"Nancy will never know," Marta fibbed.

HEN Nancy came out tonight with Ricardo and saw that spread over the boy she despised, there was going to be an explosion. Marta struggled with a delighted grin as she smoothed the spread under Botón's chin.

The boy's brown cheek was rosy with excitement, and his dark eyes adored Marta.

"You're a sweet girl, Marta," Noah said.

Because she could not be coy and flirtatious, she stood up and smiled with frank pleasure, her eyes meeting his squarely. It was a long, deep look that reached a part of her that seemed to have known him always—an intimate look, almost like a kiss. Her breath was a gasp as she turned from him. And she caught the audible sound of his breath, too.

She was giving Botón his supper on a woven willow Indian tray when the clump of hoofs turned in from the trail and stopped at the door.

"Company, Noah!" sang out a high, sweet voice.

A frightened look sprang into Botón's eyes. He pushed at the spread. "It's Miss Nancy. Take it off."

"Leave it on," Marta said.

Noah opened the door for Nancy, and then said sharply:

"Ricardo! What do you want?"

"He brought me out," Nancy said, coming in. "You wouldn't want me to ride alone at night to this God-forsaken hole, would you?"

Ricardo's laugh drifted unpleasantly into the bedroom. "She sure don't like your outfit here, Noah. Better talk business."

"You came out to bother me with that again?" Noah was angry. "You get on that horse again. I'll take care of Nancy."

Marta hurried from the bedroom, her finger on her lips. "Please be quiet. We have a sick child here."

She had planned this moment well.

Nancy whirled to Noah.

"You don't mean you have that boy in the bedroom?"

"He's sick," Noah said doggedly.

"Sick!" Nancy's rage wasn't a pretty sight. All the delicacy of her face disappeared under the thick red flame that coarsened every feature. "And did you leave my pink spread on the bed?"

She dashed into the bedroom and clawed at the spread, ripping it off just as Noah and Marta appeared at the doorway.

"Noah Conrad, I'm getting enough of this!" Nancy cried. "Living in a ranch house is bad enough, without taking in strays."

She glared with loathing at the cowering child, who buried his face in the pillow.

"How can you, Nancy!" Marta chided, kneeling to put her arm around the boy.

She wasn't posing now, even though she had planned for Nancy to see the spread covering Botón. All her heart went out to this child who was playing sick to get a little motherly attention from a woman.

Nancy continued her storming. "We're going to settle this now, Noah! Al Ricardo is here to buy. Do you want this land and this brat you've taken in—or do you want me?"

Ricardo pulled out a check book and looked expectantly at Noah, who had gone white under his tan.

Marta sensed the drama of that moment of silence. Her blood seemed to pause in her veins.

"Answer me, Noah Conrad. Take your choice—now!"

Nancy's voice was lower, and she came closer to him, lifting her face to his, her eyes swimming with tears. Weeping made her more starry, beautiful and feminine.

"Noah!" she breathed.

Deliberately Noah turned from the wet blue eyes, the pouting red lips, and the soft arms waiting to enmesh him. When he spoke, his voice was as cold as mountain water.

"Since you're forcin' me to pick, I'll take my land—and Botón."

He paused, his lips seeming to hold more unspoken words. Hesitating, he looked at Marta. She was kneeling by Botón, her long beautiful fingers curled around his brown hand. Having never practiced deception, she couldn't start now.

The clear-eyed look she gave him seemed to shut out all the others. It took to him the hot sweep of her surging blood, the deep hunger in her heart—her longing to give him and the boy he loved all the stifled tenderness in her. The lamplight made two sudden points of fire in his eyes.

"And I'll take Marta, too, if she'll have me," he went on in a suddenly hushed voice. "Will you, Marta?"

She stood up slowly. Her face wasn't plain now. It was beautiful. "Do you know what you're saying, Noah?"

"Perfectly. I'm askin' you to marry me."

Al Ricardo took Nancy firmly by the arm and led her from the room.

Botón asked eagerly, "Is Miss Marta going to stay with us, *padre?*"

"Tell you later, pard. Turn your head."

He opened his arms for Marta. She went to him, her face lighted with the radiant assurance of a girl who knows she is loved. He kissed her lips hungrily, and she responded with all the repressed tenderness she had been saving. She felt the heaving of his heartbeats, the swell of his chest under his breath. When the kiss was ended at last, her ears sang with music.

Botón's voice broke in. "I saw Miss Nancy and Ricardo kissing, *padre.*"

Noah laughed and gathered Marta close again. "It probably wasn't the first time. I reckon she and Al were soft on each other long before her pa thought to use his pretty daughter to get me to turn my land over to him."

"Those two were made for each other," Marta said without malice.

"And so were my girl and I," Noah vowed, this time not caring that Botón saw him kiss her.

Pin-Up Girl

In her heart there is no hesitation
In her bright, sparkling eyes there's
a dare
On her lips is a gay invitation—

.....

To finish the limerick in this January contest just write the last line on a postcard and mail to Pin-up Girl, RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. The winner will be awarded one year's subscription to RANGELAND ROMANCES. In cases of ties, prizes of equal value will be awarded. All entries for this January contest must be in our office at the above address by midnight on December 24th, 1945. The judges' decision will be final. . . . See announcement of winner of October contest on page 95.

♥ ♥ DREAMS ARE

By Bill Severn

Warm and lovely was Vangie.... but coolly wise. For she wanted no part of Bart's beautiful, empty dreams that might come true—some day.

♥ ♥ ♥

EXPENSIVE, COWBOY!

Sparkling Rangeland Love Novelette

"The auction sale is outside!" Vangie said angrily. "I'm not for sale!"

CHAPTER ONE

Girl from Chicago

EVANGELINE ROBERTS was tall, but full curves kept her from being angular and next to the red-haired young giant who walked with her up the wooded slope to the crest of the hill, she

seemed almost small. The pride in her eyes was bright and burning, heightened by the humiliation events in the valley had brought upon her.

They walked silently up the path they had walked in happiness so many times before, Vangie conscious of Bart Winslow's nearness and of her own desire. But she had set her mind.

The loss of the ranch had set her mind for her. Before, she and Bart hoped and planned and dreamed and pretended. There was no room for pretense now.

She stood beside Bart on the flat red rock that jutted over the drop of the hill and she couldn't look at him directly. The sun was hot and full, but she was cold in it.

Bart reached for her hand. "Don't take it like this, Vangie." He tried to make her look at him. "It's not the end of the world."

"It's the end of our world, Bart."

He was silent and his glance followed hers down the hill toward the valley. They couldn't see the crowd from here, but they knew there would be a crowd around the auctioneer as he sold out the Bar X ranch and everything in it.

The ranch had been her father's dream. He had struggled to build it and he had died, a broken and defeated man, killed by struggle against the ever-present poverty that kept his dream from coming true. Vangie and her mother had tried to keep the ranch going. They had lost out, too.

Her father and mother had a dream they couldn't afford. Vangie and Bart had dreams they couldn't afford, either.

"I don't see what difference it makes with us," Bart said. "Maybe it's better this way. You can move into town and—"

She didn't want to hurt him, but she had to make him understand. "You have no money . . . I have no money. And—there's mother to support."

"Money!" He took her hand. "Vangie, how can you talk like that? I love you. Doesn't that mean more than money?"

The touch of his hand made Vangie's pulses jump. She wanted to believe and she wanted to dream, but she stiffened to his touch. She pulled her hand free and forced herself to look up at him. "Without mother—if there were only the two of us—it would be bad enough." She shook her head. "I've had poverty all my life and I know what it does to dreams. I don't want any more."

"Maybe I can't support you like a queen." Anger tightened Bart's lips. "But we won't starve. I have the stage line and someday—"

"Someday, Bart. . . . Someday." Vangie sighed. "We can't hope for someday. This is today."

How many years Bart had struggled with the stage line! That dilapidated stage coach and the horses, almost as old. Three trips a week between Ridley and Junction City and sometimes hardly enough express aboard to pay for a trip. Someday, the Silver Queen mine would reopen—maybe. Someday, a railroad would go through Junction City—maybe. Bart was firm in his faith that the growing West needed all the transportation it could get; he believed in that Someday.

"There *is* mother," Vangie said. "I can't saddle you with that responsibility. It's mine."

"Saddle me!" Vangie thought Bart was going to shake her. "Don't talk like that. Don't ever say that again. You're my family—you and she."

"It can't be, Bart. I tried to believe it. But—losing the ranch brought me to my senses. I watched what it did to father, trying to provide for all of us and never enough for even one. I couldn't do that to you. I love you too much for that."

"Vangie." Bart's arms took her. "You don't make sense at all. You're saying you won't marry me because you love me and . . ."

Bart's kiss was full, complete. He held her tight against him. Vangie lifted her hands to push him away. Somehow, her hands went around him, clung to him.

The wind had been dead and the heat had been full. Now, a soft wind stirred through the tall brush, playing its wild song in the reeds. Somewhere far off, a bird sang sweetly, gently so as not to disturb the song in her heart.

"Oh, Bart—" She lifted her lips to his. She didn't want to fight. She wanted to stay forever in the tight, sure world of his arms.

"You can't argue against this." His lips touched the shell of her ear and the whisper was part of the song of the woods, music for the dance of her heart.

He kissed her again and the sun seemed to burn through him and blaze full upon her. This was no dream now, no pretending.

SHE moved back. Her legs were weak and her arms hurt where she had torn them from him. Somehow, she found the strength of denial. "That—doesn't change things." Her voice gave her courage. "This is good-by, Bart. I came here to say that. I—I'm saying it—now."

"Vangie!" Bart moved in front of her.

Branches reached out and caught at her skirt, like hands trying to hold her there. She pushed beyond them.

Bart's voice was tight, dry, unreal. "Money means that much to you?"

"Your happiness means that much—and mine—"

She moved on, away from him. At the edge of the woods, she stopped. She stood there, listening. Bart hadn't followed her.

Vangie lifted her head and walked slowly toward the crowd at the ranch house. Her lips moved in a prayer without words, a prayer for the courage she needed to go on alone. The sun was hot again and the wind was dead.

The auctioneer stood on the wagon, pointing to the old red plush chair, telling the crowd what a bargain it was. "The springs are as good as new, folks. Plenty of easy sittin' there. . . ."

Vangie turned away, remembering father in that chair, next to the window, looking out at the dry earth of the ranch and praying for rain. Father, watching dust and drought wipe away the last of the dream he and mother had brought to the valley so many years before.

The crowd hovered at the wagon like buzzards; friends and neighbors come to pick up the broken pieces of that dream for the change that jangled in their jeans.

Going into the house, Vangie realized it was the last time she would open that door. Odd, how much an old pine door, sagging on its hinges, can mean; how much of the song of life is in the squeak of those hinges.

How many times Vangie had run through that doorway to greet the promise of a day! Through there, she had gone on her very first date with Bart, and she had come back to open that door with the dream full in her heart after the first time Bart had kissed her.

Now, Vangie shut the door tight behind her, shut out the crowd. She found mother in the parlor, alone. The room was empty of its furniture, rugs gone from the floor and black marks on the walls where pictures had been. It was all Vangie could take to find mother sitting here in the naked room on a box where the red chair had been.

Mother's head lifted at the sound of the closing door and her eyes seemed to be looking for someone else when she raised them—father, maybe? Finally, slowly, they found Vangie and she smiled.

Vangie went to her. "Oh, Ma—" She curled herself on the floor at her feet, feeling like the worried little girl who so often had curled there, cheek against mother's

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knees, while ma explained away the problems of growing up.

But it's my turn to take the burdens now. She wasn't a child and she had to face the reality of what was to become of them, as calmly and as sure-headedly as she had put aside the dream she and Bart could not afford to buy.

For a moment longer, Vangie sat there, feeling the comfort of that arm around her, the soft touch of mother's wrinkled hand upon her hair. "There, Vangie, dear. . . . There, dear—it's not as bad as all that."

Standing, Vangie put on a careful smile. "We'll get by," she told mother, "together."

"Of course, we will. It's not like we'd lost everything. Not like there was—nothing at all."

Vangie frowned, not understanding.

"Your father left us a way of life," mother said slowly. "That means more than a few chairs or some books or—even the ranch. He taught us how to fight and when to fight. He taught us to face life with a song, no matter how hard it is, and to keep the values that mean—"

"Yes, mother." It hurt to hear mother say those things now, with everything gone. Mother was still the incurable romantic, the believer in clouds with silver linings.

Mother smoothed her skirt. She was wearing her "company" clothes, her best church-going fineries. "We ought to help boost the prices by telling folks what the things are worth. The more they bid, the more we'll have to go on, Vangie."

Vangie couldn't go out there again. Whatever they got for the furnishings wouldn't be much to live on once the mortgage and the other debts were settled. But she let mother keep that slender illusion. "You go ahead. . . . I want to sit here awhile."

In the corner, salvaged from the auction by her own prior bid, stood Vangie's phonograph, the painted flowers on its tin horn cracked and peeling. The case of records was beside it.

VANGIE bent down and cranked the handle. Carefully, she chose the record: *The Blue Danube Waltz.* The needle scratched around twice. The lilting music filled the empty room, peopled it with the ghosts of lovers who had danced through the ages to the gay song of moonlight on the water and intimate laughter. Father's favorite waltz.

Vangie had learned to dance to it before she could walk, her tiny feet atop the big toes of father's shoes as he held her and moved the two of them around the room to the music.

She loved to dance. Music did something to her, made her feet move even now in this bare room. Her eyes closed dreamily. Slowly, she waltzed around the room, hugging her arms to herself as if they held someone within them.

Faster and faster, Vangie glided, swept, turned, her skirt ruffling up in a swishing fan of color as she followed the lead of the imaginary partner in her arms.

There was sudden applause.

At first, she thought it was part of her pretending. The hands clapped again.

Vangie stopped so abruptly, she almost lost her balance. "Oh." Her hand went to her skirt and her face flamed red. "Oh, I didn't think anyone—"

"You were beautiful, Vangie." It was Austin Fosbroke. Smiling broadly, he came across the room, his arms held out to her. "Shall we finish it together?"

"No, really. . . . I didn't—" Vangie lifted the needle from the record, turned off the motor. She was actually embarrassed, but it was more than that. She was angry that he had intruded. He had no right to stand there, watching her, in that moment so secretly her own.

Austin was not unattractive. He was rather conceited, but most people allowed him that conceit. After all, he was young to have achieved the presidency of the Ridley Stockmen's Bank. He nodded now toward the window, the crowd outside. "I'm sorry about this."

"You couldn't help it. We owed the money. . . . The bank had to foreclose."

"Just the same, I wish I could have spared you the embarrassment." He moved closer, his glance adding her up and down like a column of figures. "If you had come to see me as I suggested, Vangie, we might have found some way of postponing—"

"I don't want any favors."

"You don't have to say it like that." He put his arm around her and tried to pull her close. "I want to marry you, Vangie. I told you that. If you'd be sensible—"

Vangie lifted his hand away. "I told you 'no' once before, Austin. I thought that was settled."

Austin's dark eyebrows raised speculatively and he looked slowly around the bare room. "Things are different now," he said meaningly. "You might change your mind. I can take care of you, Vangie. You and your mother. Oh, I'm not fooling myself. I know you don't love me. But you could learn. You could be the kind of a wife I want. And you'd have everything—I promise you that."

"Everything?"

"I didn't intend to talk to you about it today. I know you're upset." Austin glanced down at his hands, up again at her. "Then I figured, maybe after all, this would be the day to say it. Maybe today, you'd realize what I can do for you and—"

"The auction sale is outside!" Vangie said angrily. "I'm—not for sale!"

"Vangie!"

"That's how you make it sound."

He shook his head. "You *are* upset." He took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. "I'm a patient man, Vangie. I can wait."

"You'll wait a long time."

VANGIE counted over the assets they had left after she and mother moved into the cabin in town; their clothes and a little money (very little) and the phonograph. She thought it out carefully before she put up the shingle outside and inserted the notice in the Ridley Weekly Times: *Dancing Lessons For Children. Reasonable.*

The idea went over from the start. They still had friends and Ridley had so little culture, the mothers thought dancing lessons were just what their children needed.

The phonograph squeaked out the music while Vangie taught, counting out the beat for the awkward youngsters. "One, two, three—glide. . . ."

Over and over. Vangie realized they would never get rich this way, but it was a means of earning a living. It kept a roof over them and provided money for the food she and mother ate. What more could a girl ask? *Nothing, unless she believes in dreams.* Vangie didn't. She knew what dreams are made of.

Sometimes when Bart's stage coach rumbled past the cabin door on one of the scheduled trips to Junction City, she wondered if the wheels would stop at her door. They didn't. Bart drove past with his head carefully turned the other way until he was beyond those curtained windows.

If Bart really loved me, wouldn't he try to see me, try to make me change my mind? But when those thoughts came, Vangie broke them off, scolding herself for the perversity that inspired them. She had told Bart she wouldn't marry him unless he had money; she had put that need for money above his love, coldly and deliberately, knowing what the burden of poverty would do to marriage and to love. She had hurt him because she had to hurt him, because her love was strong enough to save Bart from the bitter futility that might have been.

But the dreams still came at night, took advantage of her while she slept. His arms around her and his lips on hers and Bart saying what her heart longed secretly to hear him say. And, sometimes, the dreams were so real she awoke to them, blinking in the dark, and terribly alone.

When the dreams came in full daylight, they were worse. She would take one of the youngsters in her arms and go through the steps, teaching him. And, for an insane moment, Bart would be in her arms, dancing with her.

Until the record stopped and the needle scratched and the noise and laughter of the children brought her back to now.

Vangie never told mother in so many words, but mother knew. "I saw Bart today," mother would say, watching Vangie, waiting for some tell-tale sign. Or, "Bart had three passengers today. Business must be pretty good."

And Vangie would say: "The new shipment of records should be in any day now from Chicago." Or, "That Curtis child! I just can't have him in the classes any more. He's always causing trouble."

Austin came over Tuesday before the afternoon class and, for once, Vangie was glad to see him. She had cut herself off from people, thrown herself so completely into the work of getting the dancing school on its feet, she hadn't quite realized how much she missed talking to someone.

There was another reason, too. She was proud of the small success she had made. She wanted Austin to know how well she

was doing. She was taking care of herself and mother, too. Without his help; without favors from anyone.

Austin sat opposite her and listened while Vangie told him about it, nodding politely in agreement with what she said, with his eyes on her all the while like they couldn't get enough of her.

Watching him, Vangie smiled. There had been times when Austin had frightened her. Now, with her new security, he seemed entirely harmless. He seemed a little like the tiny statue of the china man on the what-not shelf; set the head rocking with a touch of the finger and it would keep on rocking, back and forth.

"There's a dance at the courthouse tonight," Austin said tentatively.

Vangie smiled. "I dance all day."

"All the more reason you should go. As a dancing teacher, people will expect you to go to dances. You're trying to sell them the idea and you don't go dancing yourself. That's not good business."

Austin did make it sound logical. And she did need to relax. "Well—maybe—"

Austin squeezed her hand. "I'll be here at eight."

Vangie frowned over that touch of his hand. "Because it's good for my business. . . , That's why I'm going."

Austin's smile wasn't businesslike at all. "But, of course."

THE youngsters came for their lessons and Vangie put them through their paces and shooed them home. "Mother," she said, going into the kitchen "will you help me press the green taffeta? I'm going to the dance."

"Oh, Vangie!" Mother put the pot back on the stove and swung around excitedly. "Oh, dear, I'm so glad! When did you see Bart?"

"I'm—going with Austin."

"Oh." Mother was silent a minute. She put the pot-lifter into the box and poked at the fire. "Vangie, I've never—interfered. But—I wish you wouldn't go."

"Now, mother." Vangie fixed the smile on tight. "There's nothing to worry about. Austin's not going to eat me or anything."

"It's not that." Mother looked up. "Bart loves you and you love him." She took Vangie's hands in hers. "I know you've had a quarrel of some kind. I didn't ask you about it because—well, those things just have to work themselves out. But whatever it is—"

"You don't understand."

"I understand you. I know you love him. There's nothing else in all the world worth losing that, believe me."

"Please . . ."

Mother drew in her breath sharply. "All right. I wasn't going to tell you. Now—I think I'd better tell you."

"Tell me what?"

Mother looked down. "Bart's been seeing a lot of—a girl from Chicago. Frances Dell, her name is, and her father is the owner of the Dell Stagecoach Lines—the one that runs through Junction City. She met Bart there and followed him over here. She's got her cap set for him, Vangie."

"I don't believe it!"

"See—you do care!" Mother's head lifted that quick way and her eyes glinted like father's when he was set on something. "Are you going to let her get away with it?"

Vangie chose the words carefully. "What Bart does is no business of mine."

"Maybe it's time you made it your business."

The pull-bell rang before Vangie finished dressing for the dance. It couldn't be Austin yet; it was too early for that. Mother went to the door and Vangie went on combing her hair absently, listening to hear who it was.

"Vangie! It's for you."

"But I can't come now. . . . I haven't finished dressing. Who is it, mother?"

Mother didn't answer.

Probably one of the women about some child in the dancing class. Maybe Mrs. Curtis wanting to know why Vangie had told her precious darling he couldn't come to class any more. Annoyed, Vangie slipped the rose silk wrapper around her shoulders and pulled tight the belt.

Bart! Vangie stood there, unable to move.

Mother smiled at her, a smile that ended with a wink, and went back to the kitchen.

"I brought over your records," Bart lifted the package. "They just came in from Chicago."

"Thank you. . . . You needn't have made a special trip."

"No trouble at all."

They stood looking at each other. Vangie

turned. "If you'll excuse me, Bart. I really must—"

"There's something else." The way he said it, she knew he was making words as an excuse to go on talking to her. She watched his glance sweep the room, fix on the phonograph. "I want some lessons in dancing, Vangie. Yes. . . . That's it."

"Bart—don't be ridiculous! You know how to dance. Besides, I don't give lessons to adults. Anyhow, not now. I'm just getting—"

He went to the phonograph, put down the needle. *The Blue Danube Waltz.*

Bart came back to her, took her in his arms.

"You're acting like a child! "Vangie said.

"You said you give lessons to children." He grinned and his arms tightened around her.

Vangie stiffened. "No!"

"All right." He dropped the grin. "We won't dance then."

His kiss was hard, full. He held her until she stopped struggling. "We've both been acting like children. I was proud and hurt," he said. "And, yes—angry. I swore I wouldn't see you again until you came to me." His mouth took hers again. "You see where it got me to tell myself that. I'm here. I had to come back."

"You shouldn't have."

Bart's arms dropped. "Don't start that again. "You must know by now you were wrong."

"Nothing has changed, Bart. It just can't be. I won't marry you. . . . I won't do that to you."

His eyes narrowed. "I saw Austin Fosbroke's wagon out front today," he said slowly.

The way Bart said it was a question. Vangie knew what her answer would mean.

Bart was so close to her, she could still feel the warmth of his arms around her. All she had to say was what her heart shouted: *I was wrong, Bart. I love you. I will marry you. Even if we do have to scrimp and go without food sometimes and even if you hate me later for doing that to you—I'll take this now.*

There was a tiny noise from the kitchen; a spoon dropping, maybe a pot touching the stove. It didn't matter. It was enough to remind her of mother. It was enough to remind her again, as clearly as if a bell had sounded, that she couldn't put the burden of caring for both of them on Bart's shoulders when he was barely capable of caring for himself.

She told him, and it was like turning a knife: "Yes. Austin was here. I'm going to the dance with him tonight."

"Austin has a lot of money. You'll do well."

Vangie put out her hand. She wanted to

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tell him it wasn't like that, but she couldn't.

"Someday, Bart, you'll find someone else and—" *Someone without a mother to care for, too.*

"That won't be hard at all." There was no humor in Bart's laugh. "I know just the girl. She has money, too. More than Austin."

"Please, Bart. . . . Don't be bitter."

"Bitter? Why should I be? We're lucky, we are. Lucky as hell. We bring a good price, don't we, Vangie?"

He slammed the door so hard it shivered.

She heard his boots go down the steps outside, listened to him walk away until that final sound was gone.

The room was quiet, empty. Soon, Austin would be here to take her to the dance.

From the kitchen, she thought she heard mother crying.

CHAPTER TWO

Heartache for Two

IT WAS a cool night, almost chilly after the hot day. The moon was full, but it gave no warmth. Sitting beside Austin in his wagon, Vangie thought of other nights when the moon had been full and Bart had been close and the night had sung for them.

As they approached, the music of the dance floated up the road from the courthouse. The windows were wide, lights flickering in them as couples whirled past.

Austin helped Vangie from the wagon, his arm holding her a moment longer than was necessary. Nervously, she smiled at him and went ahead of him up the steps.

The oblong room was filled with laughter and the happy sound of feet dancing to the rhythmic twang of the fiddle and the beat of the piano. "Swing yer pardners, once aroun' . . . !"

Austin caught her to him, swung her into the stream of dancers. Twice around and other arms took her. She laughed and danced, lost herself in the dance, passed back around the circle to Austin as the music stopped. He was breathing hard, laughing, too. Austin could be fun when he lost that profit-conscious dignity.

The tempo of the music changed to a waltz. He didn't waltz as well as Bart. Vangie shut her eyes, let him lead her three times around the floor. When she opened her eyes again, they were close to the door.

It was at that moment, Bart came in. The way it happened, it seemed to Vangie later almost as if Bart had waited outside the door until she danced close, so he could make his entrance with Frances Dell.

And the girl *was* beautiful!

Frances was small, doll-like in her beauty. She clung to Bart's arm and her sparkling eyes adored him. Her gown obviously was as Chicago as she was, black satin, daringly cut, and with a soft hint of white mirabou trimming to add to its suggestive femininity.

Bart nodded formally to Vangie. He turned a full smile upon Frances.

Vangie stiffened in Austin's arms. He glanced over her shoulder. "So that's the girl." Austin's look lingered and he didn't quite manage to hide the appreciation in his eyes. Absently, thinking aloud, he said: "She could make a fool of any man."

"What do you mean?"

Austin's glance shifted back to Vangie. He laughed a trifle, embarrassed. "Nothing, really. . . . . Just that she's quite a vamp."

"Any girl could be, dressed like that—acting like that." The words rushed to Vangie's lips before she realized the jealousy they implied. She moved closer to Austin, smiled up at him, trying to win back his full attention.

She told herself it wasn't because Bart might be watching them, that wasn't why she wanted Austin to devote himself entirely to her. After all, Austin was her partner. It was perfectly reasonable for a girl to feel jealous when any man looked at another girl like that. Vangie asked lightly: "Why should we worry about them?"

"That's what I wondered." Austin frowned. "Why are you worrying about Bart?" His eyes were intent. "When you stopped going with Bart, I hoped that you and he—"

Vangie glanced down. "That's finished," she said.

Austin held her more tightly than ever. "Then there is a chance, Vangie?" He whispered the question against her cheek

as he danced her away from the door. "Tell me there is a chance—for us."

"Please, Austin." She turned her head. "Don't spoil the fun we're having. You know how I feel."

"I can wait." His hand pressed hers. "I can wait forever, Vangie—as long as there is a chance."

"I didn't say that."

The music stopped. They stood awkwardly. Try as she did to keep her head turned, Vangie's eyes sought Bart.

Frances had her hand high under Bart's arm, clinging to him that way, close to him. He was pretending that he liked it, laughing a lot and smiling as he talked to Frances. But Bart was *acting*. Vangie knew him well enough to see that now; he was uncomfortable.

Seeing that, Vangie's heart jumped reassuringly, even as she frowned at herself and wondered at the quickening of her pulses.

It took another woman to see that Frances was not sincere. *She's amusing herself with Bart. I can't let her hurt him. Whatever else, he's a friend.*

Vangie made it clear and logical in her mind. The way she put it to herself, it was a simple case of duty to remove Bart from the clutches of that—that vamp!

"Austin," he asked, "will you get me some punch?"

She timed the question so that he left as the music was about to start. She could make explanations to him later. Purposefully, Vangie made her way around the other couples to Bart. She smiled sweetly at him. "I promised to show you that new waltz step. Shall we try?"

Frances glared at her. Bart's face went red as he stammered out the introductions. "Vangie," he added for Frances' benefit, "runs a dancing school."

Bart could hardly refuse her direct request for a dance. Stiffly, he held out his arms to Vangie. She moved into their circle, smiling up at him.

Bart backed away a little as she moved nearer. He swallowed hard and he kept his eyes from looking down. "Why?" he asked. "Why, Vangie?"

A wisp of her hair kissed his cheek as they turned. "What do you mean?"

She felt the trembling of his arm around her. He said: "You know damn well what I mean." Holding hers, the palm of his hand was wet with perspiration. "What are you trying to do to me?"

"There's no reason we can't be friends," she said. "It is childish to go around making faces at each other just because things are—like they are. I want to be your friend always, Bart. Please don't hate me for—what neither of us can help."

"Friends!" His arms dropped. He stopped dancing. "Well, we can't be friends. It's Austin—or it's me." He gripped her arm so tightly his fingers hurt. "You've got to decide."

"Please. . . . You're making a scene and—"

Bart swung around without another word. He walked away. He left her standing there.

Vangie watched him go back to Frances. He took Frances' arm, led her through the door into the night. Frances hugged herself against his side. Turning as they went out, Frances looked back at Vangie and laughed at her.

The dancers swirled around Vangie, staring at the way she was rooted there where Bart had left her.

She wanted to run. She wanted to cry. She prayed an earthquake would split open the polished floor beneath her trembling feet and swallow her.

She saw Austin then, coming back from the punch bowl with two glasses. Hurrying to him, Vangie slipped her arm under his.

If he saw what happened, he said nothing about it. "You look tired," he said. "Would you like to go home, Vangie?"

Silently, she nodded.

CHAPTER THREE

Wrong Day—Wrong Man

HE dancing classes went on. "One, two, three—glide. . . ." On and on. Sometimes, Vangie thought she couldn't stand another day of it, another class. Every step she took and every step she taught reminded her of that last dance with Bart. With her own heart heavy, she tried to teach the children of Ridley to be light on their feet.

Austin called more frequently at the cabin those next two weeks. He was con-

siderate, patient; he never pressed her for an answer. Gradually, Vangie found herself thinking that it wouldn't be too bad, being married to Austin. He would give her and mother every comfort. And he *was* nice, in a way.

Vangie knew she wasn't in love with him. But then, she reminded herself, she couldn't afford love—not with the heartbreak that love most certainly would mean.

She had no illusion about getting over her love for Bart. She would love only once and Bart was that love. She would meet other men, but probably none as eligible as Austin. That was her choice: marry Austin or go on teaching forever. "One, two, three—glide. . . ."

But something held her back. She could plan it all out in her mind. But she couldn't face the decision. And Austin was shrewd enough to know the time hadn't yet come to ask her to make that decision.

When he called to see her, his eyes were eager and his hand, holding hers, betrayed the anxiety he kept carefully banked. Going to church with Vangie on Sunday, he devoted his attention to mother, ignoring the fact that mother made little effort to hide her hostility.

Tuesday, after her classes, they rode together into the hills, aimlessly pacing their horses side by side in the late afternoon sun. It was escape for Vangie; they were drifting.

At the valley road, Austin wheeled his horse into the old trail up to the Bar X ranch. Frowning questioningly, Vangie followed him. "A little surprise," he said. But he didn't explain.

They crossed the flat brown and climbed the wooded slope she and Bart had climbed together so many times. For a moment, Vangie wanted to ask Austin to turn back. But she couldn't run from things like this the rest of her life; there were too many reminders of Bart to hope for escape from all of them.

Passing the flat rock and moving down the other side of the slope, Vangie closed her eyes, giving the horse his head, remembering sharply the last time she had been here with Bart. His arms around her, and his kiss—

Austin was saying something. Vangie forced open her eyes. "This is the surprise," he said.

The old ranch house. It had been freshly painted. The sagging porch had been fixed. The windows were washed clean and curtains had been hung in them. The new owners certainly were taking good care of it.

Austin helped her down. "Well?"

She didn't understand.

He smiled a trifle. "I bought it," he said.

"You?"

"It's a good ranch—always was." He tried to make it sound casual. "With money enough behind it, I can make a profit. And I thought—" his eyes held hers—"someday, maybe you and your mother . . . might want to live here again."

He was asking her now. Not in so many words, but his eyes were asking her. It would be so simple to say, "yes". It was such a tiny word, the key that would open the door to comfort and escape from dancing classes. Saying it would settle forever the doubt in her mind, kill the last hope of those lingering and impossible dreams about Bart.

But Vangie couldn't say it. There were too many memories here for her. It had been a mistake to come here with Austin, across the hill, past the rock where Bart had held her in his arms.

Vangie knew now, clearly, that if she ever married Austin, she couldn't move back here. Mother's dream had died here and her own dream of the Someday she and Bart would share. The hills were peopled with memories and the valley was crowded with ghosts.

Austin had been too clever. He had planned this surprise too carefully. Shrewdly, he had hoped to take advantage of this emotional moment, not understanding it was the last thing he should have done. She heard his words again—*I can make a profit.* . . . He had protected himself in case her answer should be "no".

His complete lack of understanding struck Vangie all at once. *He doesn't know me at all. He doesn't know what this place means to me.*

Austin had been kind and considerate and patient, but most of that was part of his training and his way of life. It was the way he would handle a business deal at the bank, striking to clinch the deal when he thought the time was right.

Austin moved toward her now and she knew he was going to kiss her. And she thought, suddenly, that she would scream if he touched her. "No, Austin. . . . No."

He stopped and he was baffled. His expression said he didn't expect this at all. His look said: "I planned it all. This is when you tell me you will marry me."

She couldn't explain to him; she couldn't ever hope to make him understand. But she tried. "This is an unhappy place for me. We shouldn't—have come here."

He didn't understand, but he said: "I'm sorry." He helped her to the horse and he looked the way a man does when a woman does something womanly and beyond his understanding. "I thought you'd like it, Vangie."

It wasn't fair to blame Austin for what he was. Coming here had been a mistake that underlined his lack of understanding. But he wasn't asking her to understand him and she had no right to expect that he would love her in a way that would make him know this was wrong. He wanted her as his wife. Those were the simple terms. Any arrangement they made would be on those terms.

Silently, they rode back toward Ridley. Finally, he asked: "You're not angry?"

No, she said, she wasn't angry.

"May I visit you this evening, then?"

Vangie nodded. "We made a date, didn't we?"

"Well. . . . I didn't know if—"

"I am in a mood." Vangie touched his arm. "Forgive me?"

He brightened. "How about having supper with me at the hotel then? I heard they have some oysters, brought all the way from the East and—it would be different."

She hesitated a moment. "All right, Austin—if you want to." She wondered what mother would say about it. Mother wouldn't actually interfere, but the unpleasantness might be obvious and Vangie didn't want to spoil the evening, too. "Suppose I meet you at your office? We can go from there."

"Fine—I do have some work to finish," he said. . . .

Vangie opened the door to the bank at seven-thirty. The huge frame building was dark except for the glow of the single oil lamp in the front office. Austin was waiting.

She went down the narrow hall to his office, opened the door without knocking, and started in.

Her step faltered. Vangie stood shock still.

Seated on the corner of his desk, leaning back and swinging her foot as she talked to Austin, was Frances Dell.

CHAPTER FOUR

Baby, Lift Your Dukes!

AUSTIN was so absorbed in the conversation he didn't see Vangie for a moment. "It has to be done soon," he was saying. "Once the news gets here—"

Frances laughed. "Don't worry. . . . Just don't worry."

Vangie tried to back into the shadow. She bumped against the door and it clicked.

Austin jumped. "Why, Vangie!"

"Oh, hello." Frances stood. "I was discussing some—investments with Austin," she said glibly. "He told me he had a sup-

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per engagement. I didn't mean to keep him so long, Vangie." She smiled at Vangie as she went out. Voice low, she told Vangie: "I wouldn't want to keep both men from you, dear."

Vangie swung toward her, sudden anger boiling. Frances swept past her into the hall, laughing at her.

Austin came over and made a show of shaking his head. "I don't like that woman." He pointed a frown after Frances. It was a little too obvious.

"You seemed to be getting along with her all right."

"Now, Vangie—"

"You needn't explain to me, Austin. It's not my concern."

"But I want it to be your concern. Besides—we *were* discussing business." Nervously, he offered her his arm. "Shall we go?"

There was no reason for Vangie to be jealous and she told herself she wasn't jealous. Austin's explanation was logical and the snatch of conversation she had heard certainly seemed to be in connection with some business arrangement.

But she was furious with Frances. The very sight of the girl made Vangie clench her fists.

As her anger slowly cooled, Vangie wondered what business Austin would have with Frances that would bring her to the bank after hours.

As if he sensed Vangie's unvoiced question, Austin said: "She saw my office light burning and came in."

They went to the hotel, but the oysters turned out to be a rumor. The waiter explained that the hotel had expected a shipment, but the cans hadn't arrived. They ate steak instead, a good steak, but Vangie wasn't very hungry.

All the time she talked with Austin, she wondered what business Frances had with him. The doubt grew so large it blanked out the conversation. Gradually, the strong conviction grew in her mind that it must be something which concerned Bart.

Austin tried to break through Vangie's preoccupation. "I'm sorry about the oysters. But we will have some next time. I promise you that."

Vangie smiled, trying to pick up the thread of conversation. "Better not promise, Austin."

He laughed. "Don't worry. Shipments of everything will be on time once the government mail contracts go through to—" He stopped. He seemed to choke on his food. Quickly, he lifted the glass of water.

"Contracts?"

"I was joking." Austin's smile was expansive. "Lot of talk in Washington about the government taking over the mail service across the country and handing out contracts to the express companies." He laughed again. "They're always talking back there. It's like the railroad they never get around to building—we've been hearing that talk for years." He patted her hand. "You won't have to wait until then for oysters."

"Well, I certainly hope not. They've been talking about the railroad for ten years. I could get pretty hungry by then."

She shut her mind to Bart and gave her full attention to Austin. He was trying hard to be nice. When he took her home, she let him kiss her good night. Just once, a brief touch of his lips. She felt she owed him that, after all her moods.

She said good night again and shut the door. He was a patient man.

But the sense of companionship vanished as she closed the door. Bart's kisses she had carried into the house with her to dream upon whole nights through. Austin was forgotten as soon as he was out of sight.

The thought of Bart came back strong, filled her again.

She started to get ready for bed and she couldn't get those scraps of conversation out of her mind. Austin's joke about the mail service and Frances' visit to his office.

Her hands stopped fumbling with the buttons of her skirt. She buttoned it again, put on her shoes. It might be nothing at all, but she had to tell Bart.

Whatever the information was worth, Bart had to know. Vangie didn't decide, she wasn't conscious of thinking it over in her mind until she reached the decision that she would have to see him.

She knew only that one moment she was getting ready for bed and the next moment she was dressed again and going out the door to find Bart and tell him what she had heard and what she didn't understand about it.

The street was deserted now. The houses were dark and the only noise was from the two saloons, their yellow brilliance like beacons on opposite sides of the street.

Vangie crossed the street and back again to escape the lights, not wanting anyone to see her as she made her way toward the stable where the old stage coach and the horses were kept. Bart made his home in the one-room cabin behind the stable. If anyone saw her going there now, there *would* be talk in town.

Vangie moved quietly from the street into the dark alley between the stable and his cabin.

A soft whispering sound stopped her. She smiled inwardly at her nervousness, deciding it was the horses moving in their stalls. She moved two steps more. The whispering stopped her again.

Voices: *Bart's voice—and Frances'!*

They were seated on the steps of Bart's cabin in the semi-darkness. They couldn't see her, but the light at the end of the alley made their close outlines clear. The words were clear now, too.

Frozen there, discovering them like this, Vangie heard Bart tell Frances: "You shouldn't have come here."

"But I had to, darling. One of father's men rode in from Junction City tonight. Father's furious. I have to go back. He just returned to Junction City from the East. When he found I was gone, he raised an awful scene."

"I didn't ask you to come here," Bart said. "I didn't ask you to stay."

"Oh, darling. Don't be so mean to me." Vangie saw Frances' arms go around Bart. "You're so stubborn," the girl went on. "You could sell your old stage line and come with me. Father will give you a good job and we'll—"

"Even if I wanted to—who'd buy me out?"

"The bank, maybe." Frances coaxed, "You *could* try, Bart."

"Austin?" Bart laughed. "He wouldn't buy anything unless there was a profit."

"You don't want to go with me."

Vangie saw Bart stand. He turned slowly and he faced Frances as she clung to him again. "No," he said. "I don't want to go." He lifted his hands and took Frances' arms from around him. "You're beautiful and you're wealthy and any man would be a fool to say no to you. Maybe I am a fool—and maybe not. I thought for awhile that I could—"

"It's *that* girl! You're in love with Vangie!"

"Yes," Bart said quietly. "I'm in love with her."

He said it softly, but to Vangie, the words were a shout, echoing and re-echoing in the darkness until they filled her. She smiled. And the smile was straight from her heart.

She strode down the alley then. She walked up to them.

"Vangie!"

Frances moved in front of Bart, stood between them. "You followed us here," Frances accused. "You cheap little eavesdropper. You've been here listening to what we said—"

"Maybe it's a good thing I heard what you said. It makes a lot of things clear." Vangie turned to Bart. "You were right about Austin." She remembered what

(Please continue on page 98)

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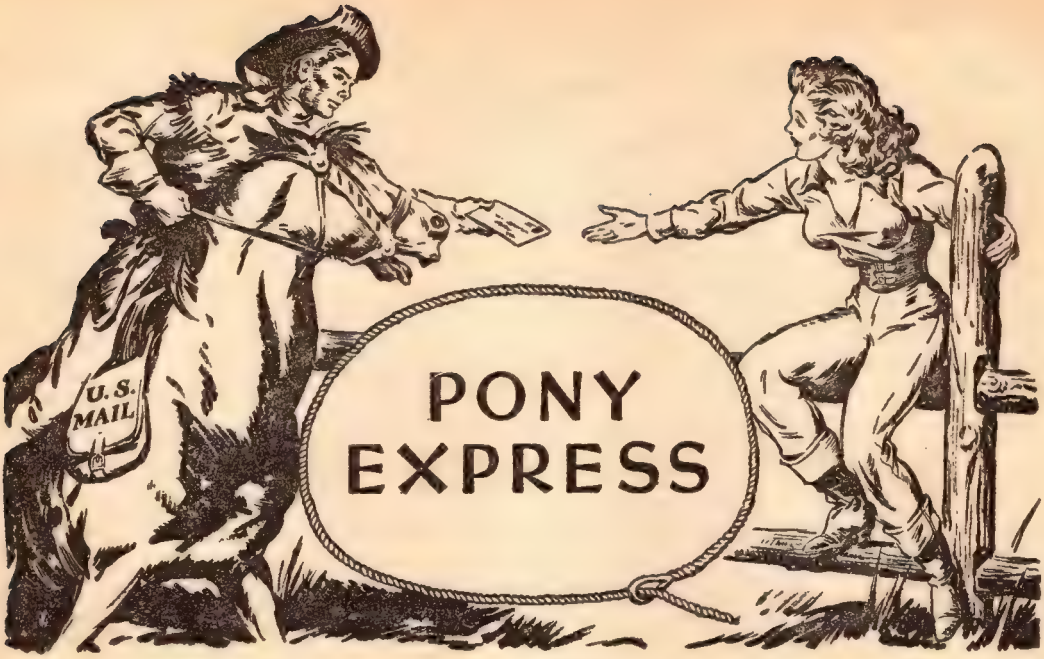

Every lonely RANGELAND ROMANCES reader can get acquainted with our lively pen pals all over the world.

Beach-Party Sailors

Dear Editor:

We wonder if you have room in your "Pony Express" for three lonely sailors.

We read RANGELAND ROMANCES and enjoy them very much. We are Marvin Munson S2/c and John Williams S2/c and Clayton Daniels S1/c. We have been overseas for several months and don't get much mail at all. So come on, girls everywhere, and make some lonely sailors happy.

We are "beach-party" sailors and were in the invasion of Iwo Jima and have some interesting things to write about. So, girls, let's sling some ink.

Sincerely,
U.S.S. Mellette (APA-156)
c/o Fleet Postoffice
San Francisco, Calif.
JOHN WILLIAMS S2/c
MARVIN MUNSON S2/c
CLAYTON DANIELS S1/c

An Average Miss America

Dear Editor:

Please publish my plea for pen pals in your next edition of RANGELAND ROMANCES. I am not very big so I can't be forceful but I promise to be faithful. I am 19 years of age, 5 ft. 3 in. and weigh 95 lbs. My hair is light brown and my eyes are gray. Just an average "Miss America."

My hobbies are, collecting miniature cats and costume jewelry. For pastime I love to read a good mystery, see a baseball game, go to a movie, listen to Bing Crosby, make most of my clothes and roller skate.

Come on and write, everybody, I will be waiting.

DOROTHY ALLEN
1503 S. 12th St., Mt. Vernon, Ill.

A Guarantee

Dear Editor:

This request comes direct from a seventeen-year-old youth who wants pen pals. I have blue eyes; light brown hair; weigh 120 lbs; 5 feet 4 inches. I am very fond of dancing and correspondence. I guarantee that letters from anyone will be answered immediately. Write as soon as possible. Start right now and do not hesitate.

J. H. THEUNISSEN
23 Cook Street
Observatory
Cape Town, S. Africa.

Expressive Dark Eyes

Dear Chief:

Most of your letters salute you with "Dear Editor", but I have written for newspapers, periodicals, sheets and even a few pulps and rags, so I claim the perogative of calling you "chief." Now to get down to business—statistically speaking—I'm 28 years old (don't tell anyone though) and 5 ft. six plus a fraction, weigh 128, dark eyes which are said to be very expressive, dark hair, light complexion, married and childless. My hobbies are many and varied. Being a creature of moods, I make a hobby of whatever intrigues me at the moment, ride it hard and then file the experience for future reference. These "hobbies" range from the simple pleasures of the maidenly arts, sewing, needle-point etc., to

attending wrestling matches and producing radio skits which I write, cast, rehearse, time, and announce, all by myself. Versatile, "ain't" I? I'm interested in people, like to write letters and am a verbose writer, and I love to receive letters. I hope hundreds of females of all ages will write to me, be they six or sixty. I do not want to hear from the male gender, for although my husband indignantly asserts that he is NOT jealous, I've studied psychology and I'm taking no chances of hurting the dear boy's feelings. Travel is an almost inexhaustible subject to me as I've been roving about the world since I made my first cross-country trip from my California birthplace to New York at the age of two. I've been across both Atlantic and Pacific, north to Montreal and South as far as Brazil, Chile, and Ecuador. I play piano, violin, and guitar and have studied painting, though I'll never be a Rembrandt. Now it's time for me to yell "Copy" and for you to proof read and punctuate this conspicuous "first." Thanks for the space, I'll do the same for you someday! My by-line is—

BAYB JOHNSON
(Mrs. S. R. Johnson)
163 Elm Street
West Haven, Conn.

Fact Collector

Dear Editor:

I should like very much to travel via the Pony Express and meet those people who like letter writing as well as I. I am twenty years of age, 5 ft. 7 in. tall, weigh 125 pounds, and have brown hair and blue eyes. Until last September I lived in Louisiana and a short time in Mississippi.

My favorite hobby is collecting odd facts, clever expressions, and jokes—I enjoy reading and writing and some outdoor sports with hiking and swimming ranking high.

I like people. I want to hear from everyone everywhere.

Very truly yours,
LOUISE STEWART
1731 S. Kerth Avenue
Evansville 13, Indiana

Flicker-Star Pix

Dear Rangeland Romances Readers:

I hope I can have this letter published in your letter section. In case my name gives any doubt, I am a girl, aged 15, 5′ 8″, light-brown hair and blue eyes. I would like to write to any girls and boys from 15 to 18 who have the same interests I have.

I like to draw and paint, swim, ride, and write letters. I love the outdoors and all animals, especially dogs and horses. I like to collect things, the latest is movie star pictures, and I know some French. Please write!

FELICITY HOLLYDAY
St. Michaels, Maryland

Time for Action!

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANGELAND ROMANCES for a long time, especially the Pony Express. But now I feel that I have sat on the sidelines long enough. Time for action!

I am a 20-year-old soldier, blue-grey eyes, brown hair, 6′ 3″. I like to dance, read, and go to movies. I work on a hospital ship and have made trips to England and Bermuda. I have also been stationed in Texas, Arkansas, and Wisconsin in the M.Ps. Please don't disappoint me by not seeing this in print. Everyone is welcome, especially tall folks.

PVT. JACK JACQUES
ASN 36815896
U.S.A. H.S. John Meany
c/o Postmaster
New York City

Calling Farmerettes!

Dear Editor:

I have been a steady reader of RANGELAND ROMANCES for the past three years. I enjoy Western stories very much and love the magazine. I also have written to you several times but have received no results in having my name and plea entered in your magazine. I am twenty-five years old, five feet ten and weigh one sixty. Have brown hair and eyes. Would like to correspond with farmerettes, nurses and those in the service. I enjoy and love to correspond. I promise to answer all letters from those mentioned hereon. My favorite pastime is collecting snapshots. I play the guitar and love dancing, swimming and most all sports. I do sincerely hope that you will give me this chance. If you can't enter my name, please find room for me soon. I am willing to wait my turn.

Here's hoping I will be hearing from those pals. Wishing your magazine all the success in the world.

Sincerely yours,
MR. JOHN SWEC, JR.
2222 Walnut Avenue
Niagara Falls, N. Y.

Green Eyes

Dear Editor:

I've been reading your RANGELAND ROMANCES for quite some time. I really appreciate it. It is so different from other "mags" of the same type!

This is the first time I have aired my desire to acquire some pen pals. Won't some of you write to a New Hampshire girl? I'm seventeen, dark haired, have green eyes and am 5′ 6″. I'd rather dance than eat, collect recordings, read and also like skating, riding and swimming. I go to school still, but this is my last year.

Although I have plenty to keep me busy I'm sure I could answer a whole gang of letters. Please try me out, all you Western beaux and belles.

ALYCE GRACE
South Road
Fremont, N. H.

Hi, Betty!

Dear Editor:

This is I or should I say "me" trying to crash the pages of your column again. You had better get used to me, since I don't intend to give up until I do make it.

In case you don't remember me, I am an eighteen-year old, golden brown-haired, dark-

(Please continue on page 94)

A LITTLE LIGHT CHEATING

By Anita Allen

"LOOK," Aunt Joyce commanded and reined in before a poster tacked to the wall of the Feed and Grain Store. "Look at—*that.*"

"I'm looking," Poppy told her Aunt Joyce dutifully. "It's a picture of someone who's wanted for bank robbery or murder. I can tell that from here."

The older woman, who miraculously managed to wear pince nez glasses even while riding, eyed her reprovingly. "Please. I want you to really *see* it. You've been away ever since the campaign started and this is an example of what the politicians are doing to this range. The Wyoming Progressive Party is running *that* for mayor."

Poppy nudged her mount closer and, squeezing her eyelashes together as a shield against the sunlight, carefully inspected the poster. "Mack McClellan," she murmured. "Sounds like the name of a prize winning steer or an expensive sheep dog."

"Exactly!" Joyce Reade adjusted her spectacles at an even more imposing angle. "Well, it's only four days until election and they'll find out the people won't stand for it."

"Still," the girl said, slowly. "He looks —capable. Do you know him?"

Capable of what? Throwing lead? He might do as a sheriff, but we need a different type in the mayor's office.

"Have you met him?" Poppy persisted.

"No—why should I? He's supposed to be a rancher with a place in the southern part of the county, but I've never seen him. Naturally, he doesn't come to the women's party rallies and I've only gone to one of their's—and then, just for a few minutes, to get an idea of what they're doing."

Aunt Joyce wheeled her pony across the street to the postoffice, but Poppy remained, thoughtfully, before the poster. There was something about the face and grin— But of course, campaign pictures never resembled the candidate.

She followed her aunt to the postoffice and Joyce, already out of the saddle said: "You needn't come in. I'll only be a minute."

Poppy got down, tied her pony to the hitchrack and stepped up to the board sidewalk. And, noticing that the department store adjoining the postoffice had changed its window display, went to inspect it. The window glass, balancing light and shadow, showed her reflection with mirror like clarity and she liked the way she looked.

The trim riding pants and soft shirt showed the smooth curves of torso and throat, the soft-leather boots stressed the fineness of her legs and her neckerchief was the same shade as her hair, which the sun had bleached to an almost silvery pallor. By contrast, her eyes were intensely blue and her mouth deeply warm so that her tanned skin gave an exotic quality.

"There's the color I want," a masculine voice stated. "The color of that girl's neckerchief."

Poppy's face turned definitely cool and she turned to look at the speaker. But he

Breezy young Poppy thought it would be lively fun—and good politics —to stir up all the women against the men.

"You—you trickster!"

was unaware of anything except her neckerchief. "Exactly that color," he repeated to the clerk who was holding up bolts of materials he had brought outside to compare in the sunlight.

The girl waited, coolly aloof. When the man's glance met hers, he grinned. It was an easy grin and did unusual things to his mouth, so that Poppy forgot she wanted to make him realize that his manners needed attention.

"Sorry, Ma'am," he said, and finished pulling off the Stetson which had traveled down over one ear. "I'm trying to get some curtains for my house. I want something that'll look like part of the sunshine—" He broke off and a dark line of color moved up his jaws. "I mean I want a light color."

The grin, breaking the controlled line of his mouth, pulled at her. And she wondered if he knew his hair was mussed and falling across his forehead. He was looking at her expectantly, his gray eyes unguarded and frank as a boy's.

Actually, they held the confident, friendly assurance of a child who had never been repelled. With a sense of faint shock, she realized he probably regarded the whole world in just the same way—as if it could not refuse him.

But his face doesn't fit his eyes, she thought. *It shows control and quiet. Too much quiet. Yet, there he stands—certain that I'm interested in his getting the right color for his curtains!*

"Why don't you try amber?" she asked. "That'll seem almost the same as sunshine."

"Amber." He repeated, memorizing the word. "Thanks, Ma'am." He turned into the store, but stopped and swung sharply around. "My name's—"

"Poppy!" Aunt Joyce's decisive voice cut through his words. "Oh, there you are. Why—" she halted and frowned at him through her pince nez—"I know you, don't I?"

"Maybe. I've been around this country for quite a while."

Joyce Meade nodded impressively. "Now, I remember. I saw you at a rally of the Wyoming Progresive Party a few days ago when I stopped to listen to their nonsence. *We're* going to elect Mr. Henry Prentice Newman."

"We, Ma'am?"

"Exactly. The Associated Women's Party—that's the political affiliation of all the women's clubs in the district. When women want anything they get it."

HE SHIFTED his weight from one foot to another and Poppy realized he was unusually tall. Lean to the point of gauntness, he was dressed like every other cowman in denim trousers, flannel shirt and boots, with a gun suspended from a broad leather belt. But where had she seen him before? What made her positive that somewhere, long ago, they had encountered each other?

"Who's Henry Prentice Newman, Ma'am?"

"He's the district superintendent of schools. I thought everyone knew that. And he's one of the most cultured, able—"

"Yeah. But I never heard him called anything except Newt before. He's a nice old hombre at that. Good-afternoon, Ma'am," he finished politely and nodding at Poppy began to edge away.

"You didn't finish telling me your name." She reminded him.

His friendly gray gaze moved over her face and came to rest on her mouth. "It's —Pete, Ma'am." He turned and strode into the store.

Poppy looked at her aunt. "That tells all. Who is he?"

"Do you expect me to know? I saw him once at a political rally, but I didn't meet him or talk to him. He was just there—probably a waddie from one of the spread."

"Probably." The girl agreed and added: "Where are you going now?"

"Shopping for dining room curtains and towels and—"

Poppy said: "Get amber-colored curtains. They'll look like sunlight."

"Amber? In that room?"

Poppy shrugged. "No, I guess not. But do you mind if I don't go with you—don't feel much like shopping."

"You never do, but I get along better alone, anyhow. Meet me here in about an hour." She moved briskly through the store doors.

Poppy strolled down the street and, as the business section was less than four blocks long, paused at the first empty cor-

ner. The town of Greybull offered nothing at this hour and she might as well join her aunt. The friendly-eyed stranger would be gone by this time.

A shadow dropped over her, the shadow of a tall man. And even as she turned, she knew she would once more encounter the warmly expectant gaze of the man named "Pete."

"Hi, Ma'am." His tone was surprised. "I was hoping I'd see you again but I didn't think my luck was this good."

"Didn't you?" She squeezed her eyelashes together to shut out the sunlight as she looked up at him and, once more there was that sudden pull at her senses when he grinned. There was a definite moulding to his face as if it had been trained to quiet waiting. *A grim kind of waiting,* she thought. *And his mouth is hard except when he smiles.*

Poppy asked: "Did you get your curtains?"

"Yeah. Quite a job buying stuff, isn't it? I've never bothered about curtains on my house before, but now—well, it's time to fix the place up."

"Do you live near Greybull?"

He hesitated. "A few miles south." And he went on, quickly: "I was thinking of what your aunt said about the election and the Women's Association. Do you belong to it?"

"Not exactly, because I've been away for the last two months—visiting in Denver. When I got back yesterday I found Aunt Joyce swimming in politics."

"Which means you'll jump in, too."

Poppy's lips curved and became a sharper crimson. "Probably. In fact, I'm going to speak at a meeting in the schoolhouse, tonight."

"What do the women want from their mayor? I don't know much about their plans. . . . Maybe there's some place around here where we can talk."

"Not in Greybull at this time of the day."

"Then how about taking a ride? That's my buckboard just below the corner."

His gray eyes held complete, pleasant confidence, the assurance of a nice small boy.

Poppy's throat began to feel tight and before she could speak, he was helping her into the buckboard. "My aunt will be ex-

pecting me," she said, as he turned the horses.

"We'll be back in plenty of time."

The tightness left her throat and she looked at him with half-angry astonishment. His gaze was on the road and there was nothing boyish about his brown, hard-lined profile. The tiny lines at the corners of his mouth had probably been etched there by the same thing which stamped his face with a look of controlled stillness. Above the flannel shirt, the strong, masculine throat flowed down into wide shoulders and there was an outward thrust to his chin. She thought: *What made me come with him and where are we going?*

As if reading her thoughts, he said: "We'll stop near the Green River Bend, Ma'am. It's pretty there."

She did not speak and he turned his head to look at her. "Now, tell me about the Women's Association. Do you think they're handling their campaign right?"

Poppy said: "I don't know. Maybe I could decide that if I knew more about the opposition party. What's their man running on—and who is he? I mean, what's he done?"

"The platform's simple enough, but its something this district needs. A town government that'll work to bring in more concerns dealing in ranchers' needs. As it is we have to send to Denver or the East for most of the stuff we need—which means the cost of shipping is added, not to mention the loss of time. The right kind of mayor could do a lot to develop this part of the range."

"Well," Poppy said uncertainly. "It doesn't sound very—drastic."

He grinned and for the smallest part of a second, his eyes changed. A spark ignited in their depths and destroyed the young, boyish warmth. "Yeah, but none of our office holders have tried it. Newt—Mister Prentice Newman, as your aunt calls him—will dream along as mayor just as he's dreaming along in his school job, trying to avoid trouble."

"That's not fair. Mr. Newman—"

"Has occupied his office and that's all. Here we are." He sent the buckboard off the road onto the grass which covered the banks of the Green River, and helping her down, led the way toward a flat boulder shadowed by big-branched cottonwoods.

"But maybe," he continued, watching her perch on the edge of the rock, so that her feet dangled over the water, "it's just a matter of opinion. The smartest party'll win—and the women's outfit isn't being very smart."

"Why not?" demanded Poppy.

"Well," he fished a sack of makings out of his pocket and began to roll a smoke, keeping his eyes on her face. And once more the fleeting white spark shot through their depths; once more he was hard looking, with no hint of young confidence in his glance. "They're not making enough of an issue. I mean they ought to put the men voters on the toughest spot of their lives. Get over the idea that if the men defeat the women, they'll never forget it—that it'll be considered a slur on their sex. The boys won't want to face that so they'll vote for your candidate just to keep the peace."

Poppy's eyes measured his, searching their grayness. "That doesn't sound sensible. The issue isn't a war between the sexes but whether Mr. Newton or—or—"

"McClellan."

"—is the best candidate."

"Politics are never sensible and it *is* a battle between the sexes, because all the women are behind one candidate. So the best idea is to fight it out on those lines. It'll scare the men right off the range."

ONCE more her glance dug into his eyes, but they were entirely friendly and s e r e n e l y sure of being answered with friendliness—openly offered warmth. Her hands closed together and the pulses in her wrists were too fast. She looked away from him so that she would stop wanting to touch him or smooth his hair. A man shouldn't have eyes which reminded you of a blazing hearth in the midst of a storm or of half-forgotten dreams of tenderness.

"I've been wondering about your name," he said, and as his lowered tone made her glance lift, she saw that he was moving to a place at her side. And his profile was turned toward her, showing its lean outlines, the faint grooves at the corners of his mouth and the thrust of his chin.

Her hands broke away from each other and she pressed them against the flat surface of the rock to keep them steady. But

the new, sharp disturbance did not lessen and she wanted to see his eyes again so that she could realize she had been wrong about him. They would be as still and controlled as his face.

He went on: "I've never heard it before. That is, as a girl's name."

"It's an alias to hide the humiliation of my real name. Parents are cruel and my father's hobby was Latin, so he called me "Pomona."

His glance shot to hers, and he murmured: "The Goddess of Fruitfulness."

Her lips parted, but formed no words, and her cheeks were hot, under his gaze. She wished he had not come so close to her and wished she could end the sudden fear which was not of him. "I didn't think you'd know," she said, finally. "My father was quaint like that."

"*Was?* Is he dead?"

She nodded. "He died five years ago. My mother had died when I was two, so Aunt Joyce came to live on the Diamond K and look after me. Now you know everything and I still haven't heard your name!"

His grin came slowly and the disciplined lines of his mouth broke. He put out his hand and his eyes asked for more than she had given; for as much as he was offering her. "Pete's the name. Your's is Poppy. I'd like to keep it that way—for a while. It makes us—our meeting—entirely our own. Cuts it off from the rest of the world."

The warmth in her cheeks blazed higher, stinging against the skin. His hand was waiting and she took it.

He murmured: "It's a bargain." But then he reached for her other hand.

"And what *is* the bargain?"

"This, maybe." He drew her from the rock, into his arms. "Your lips are like poppies, too—the scarlet kind."

She told herself not to let him kiss her. She would laugh at just the right second when it would shatter every bit of his male pride. Now, as he was bending his head to take her lips. . . . But his mouth was already against hers and she knew she could not have made herself laugh. The disarming honesty of his eyes was too important. You couldn't disfigure such gentleness. Yet, the man who was holding her in his arms wasn't actually like that! Instead, his mouth was marked with deliberate control and the gauntness of his body merely masked its hard, steely strength.

His kiss made her remember the swift white spark which had flashed into his glance. Her breath slowed and tangled upon itself so that she could not breathe although her blood was racing so swiftly that a thousand pulses were beating against her flesh.

Her hands slid from his shoulders to his face, but at that, she halted. She had wanted to do this almost from the first moment she had seen him and it was a growing need which might become overwhelming hunger. Sharply, she drew back out of his arms and said, almost curtly: "I'd like to go back to town. My aunt'll be waiting."

"Right away. But Poppy, it's all right, isn't it—between us?"

"No," she said swiftly, as if sudden, terrifying knowledge had come to her. But the determination could not stand against the honest warmth with which he was looking at her. Again, the desire to touch him, to stretch out her hands to the fire of his strange, young sincerity was threatening her. "I don't know," she added. "I—"

"It has to be," he said, and his voice was very low. "But I'll wait for you to understand. When will I see you again?"

"Why—"

"You're speaking at the political meeting tonight. What about meeting me tomorrow afternoon, in front of the department store? I'll be there at two."

She nodded and her lips curved until there was the suggestion of a dimple in one cheek, even as faint, puzzled lines cut into the flesh between her brows. "Now, we'd better hurry," she said, and started toward the buckboard to conceal her confusion and uncertainty. "Aunt Joyce is firm."

THEY made the trip back in less than half the time they had spent on the way out and Poppy found her Aunt just emerging from the store. "I want to get home," she said at once. "I'm going to write another speech for tonight. Look, Aunt Joyce, the Women's Association has been handling their campaign wrong—"

She explained, steadily, all during the ride to the Diamond K.

When they finally entered the ranchhouse, the older woman, conceded, some-

what doubtfully: "We can try it. I'm not sure it's wise, but maybe you're right. And you'd better get started if you're going to do the whole speech over. Keep it short, though—there are a lot of speakers. Mr. Newman won't speak tonight. This is a build-up for his open-air talk to the whole town tomorrow."

Poppy, at the small desk in her room, chewed pencils and spoiled paper for an hour and a half, but at the end of that time she was satisfied. She studied the new speech while she bathed and propped it up in front of the mirror as she dressed. At six o'clock her aunt came in with the announcement that the buckboard was waiting, and with the speech still clutched in her hands, she started for Greybull.

The town school-house was already filled when they arrived and as she and her aunt took places on the speakers' platform, her glance swept over the rows of faces. But "Pete" was not present. Perhaps he would come later. She wanted him to hear the speech which he had said would "really make a fight out of the election."

The first speaker was introduced. Another followed and finally, Joyce Reade, said: "Now, we're going to hear from the younger generation. Their interest in government is as great as our own and often their viewpoint is fresher. Poppy Reade will tell you why we must have Henry Prentice Newman for mayor."

Poppy got to her feet and stumbled forward, the tightly rolled pages of her speech clenched in cold fingers. Without looking at it, she plunged into her subject. "The issue is not merely electing the best man to the office. There is an even greater one. That is, the position of women on this range! Have we, as a sex, no standing as human beings or citizens? Will the men who are opposing us simply force us to accept their candidate—regardless of our wishes? Can the men do that and continue to pretend they are loyal or affectionate husbands, fathers or friends? Every woman in the county wants Henry Prentice Newman to be elected. If he is not, it means that the men haven't the slightest respect for our desires, opinions or ideas—"

Some of her nervousness was disappearing as she warmed to the subject and she swept on, finishing with the challenge: "No man on this range who loves his wife, daughters or sisters, will vote for anyone except Mr. Newman. Those men who do are expressing their contempt not only for the women of their families, but for our sex as a whole."

She sat down and there was an odd, uneasy silence. Finally, a spatter of applause came and someone in the back of the hall, shrieked:

"That's right—that's exactly the truth."

The applause roared up to echo against the ceiling.

Joyce Reade arose to introduce the next speaker. Poppy once more searched the faces in the audience, without seeing Pete.

A small boy was making his way up the steps to the platform and his grin made her think of the controlled lines of a man's mouth breaking as he smiled. The boy hesitated and then edged to her side. "This is for you, Miss Reade," he said in a hoarse whisper and thrust a note into her hand.

As she opened it, every other woman on the platform eyed her speculatively. She read to herself: "Dear Poppy: I thought it best not to be seen at your meeting. But I was just outside the door while you were speaking. Can you get away now and meet me? I'll be waiting in front of the department store. Tell your aunt you're driving home with a friend. Pete."

She crumpled the sheet of paper into a ball, smoothed it out again and put it into her purse. Why did he want her to sneak away and meet him? What was the reason he simply hadn't come into the school house and, at the end of the meeting, asked to take her home?

Of course, she wouldn't leave now. She didn't go in for secret meetings. She opened the purse again and touched the folded paper with her fingers. Leaning closer to the plump matron seated beside her, she whispered:

"Tell my aunt something's—come up. I have to go—somewhere. She needn't wait for me because someone will drive me out to the ranch."

The woman nodded and Poppy moved as noiselessly as possible, down from the platform. As she hurried for the nearest door she could feel her aunt's disapproving stare following her. Without glancing back, she went out into the school yard and Pete stepped out of the shadows beyond the porch.

She halted, sharply. "You said the department store!"

"Yeah, but then I decided to wait here—at least until the meeting started breaking up. I've got the carriage across the street."

"Wait. I'm going back right away. I just wanted to know what this is all about? Why the secrecy?"

"Tell you later—when we're away from here. Poppy," he added, "you're not afraid of me?"

EVEN in the thick gloom she was conscious of a sincerity which was like a warming hearth fire. And although she could not see his face clearly she knew that the expectancy was in his eyes; the kind of expectancy she could not fail. "No," she said, and knew that she was lying. "Of course not."

"Then let's go." His hand closed on her arm, starting her across the street before she could repeat her questions and, when they were in the carriage, he was busy with the horses.

Only at the edge of town, did she remember. "You were going to tell me why we had to meet so—secretly."

"No real reason. I just didn't want a lot of curious women staring at us. Remember, I said we're—our being together—is something special that has nothing to do with the rest of the world."

She was silent and he said: "Your speech was great. That'll stir things up. By the time all those women deliver their demands to their husbands and insist on them showing proper respect at the polls, this town ought to be interesting."

Her eyelashes squeezed together as she studied his lean, dark profile. Were the corners of his eyelids crinkled and the ends of his lips faintly tilted?

"Here we are," he said, and turned the buckboard off the road onto the banks of the green river. Sending the ponies along the bank, he pulled in just beyond the boulder where, a few hours ago, he had held her in his arms.

"Now, tell me," she commanded.

He turned and his arm brushed against her shoulder. His face was a dim outline in the gloom, but the disturbing threaten-

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ing desire to touch him, was moving through her, turning her blood into racing fire. "Tell you? What?"

"Whatever you had in mind when you sent me the note tonight."

"Oh, yeah." The pressure of his arm against her shoulder increased a little and she wanted to move away. But if she could, for just a moment, grasp and hold the disarming quality in him, then perhaps it would no longer disturb her. *It's like a—great gentleness or — tenderness,* she thought. "And maybe he's not that way at all. "I wish I could be sure."

"I wanted," he said slowly, "to tell you how lovely you are."

She stared at him. "That's all? That's the only reason I left the meeting?"

"Isn't that reason enough? Isn't it more important than a political meeting? Maybe," his voice roughened, "it's even more important than anything else in life."

She locked her hands tightly together, but his arms were going around her, drawing her against his gaunt, tall body, and her fingers unclenched. Slowly, her hands lifted to his face and touched the firm, dark skin. Her head tilted in waiting.

At his kiss, her eyes closed and she felt all of herself surrender. It *was* gentleness or a deep tenderness, but being sure was not freeing her of it. Instead, its warmth was entering her blood, and igniting a hundred, swift flames.

A second or many minutes later when the kiss ended, he said: "Isn't it more important?"

"Pete," her hands closed on his shoulders. "I—I'm puzzled. About you and me. Some of the things you do—like this meeting tonight. What's your full name and where do you live?"

He straightened up and she felt as if he had moved away from her. "I live about five miles south of Greybull. My spread's a pretty good one, but it won't mean anything again until you're there, too. Even those curtains I bought for the house look kind of lonesome without you. And—"

"But I want to know your name!"

"Poppy," he bent over her and she felt his breath touch her cheek. "Can't we let things stand as they are for a little while? I love you and I'm—myself. Maybe even the man you want. Do we have to change that so soon?"

She drew back, wondering if a million tiny fires had ignited in her blood when he kissed her; doubting that she could not resist the need to touch him. "I—see. You don't want me to know. I don't understand it, because I can find out. Lots of people in Greybull probably could tell me. But I won't ask. I'll never ask anyone—not even you. Now, please drive me home."

"It isn't because I'm hiding anything important, Poppy. It's just—I want to wait until after election. That'll be in three days."

She said very evenly: "There's no longer any reason for ever telling me. If you won't take me home, I can walk back to town, I suppose."

He turned sharply and unwound the reins, lifted the whip. "You'll be at the Diamond K in half an hour."

And that was exactly what happened. He drove without speaking and Poppy, sitting as far away as the seat permitted, sat in stiff, deadly silence.

When the buckboard stopped before the Diamond K house, she started out at once, but somehow, he got down so swiftly that he was at her side before her foot could touch the ground. "Careful," he said. "Skirts have a habit of getting caught."

And, as if to make certain her skirt did not catch, he lifted her into his arms and held her there. "Good night," he said, and his lips held hers long enough to catch their helpless, reckless answer.

He put her down and she almost ran up the steps, telling herself she would be very careful not to see him again. "He's—a cheat," she decided. "The worst sort of cheat."

WHEN she arrived at the rodeo grounds the next night, with her aunt and Henry Newton, the women's candidate for Mayor, her glance fled hurriedly over the crowd, searching for him.

"Of course, he's not here," she told herself. "Any more than he was at the meeting in the schoolhouse last night. For some reason he doesn't intend to let me know who he is, and he's probably afraid if he came here, someone would mention his name without my asking. I'll never ask about him. Never." But she went on watch-

ing the people crowding into the grounds where Henry Newton was to speak.

"Well, the town's certainly turning out," Joyce Reade said as they took places on the platform. "I didn't expect a crowd like this. More men than women, too. Your speech seems to have stirred 'em up, Poppy."

Every seat was taken and new arrivals were crowding into the space around the arena. But, the girl realized that the atmosphere seemed strangely quiet. Almost tense. And most of the men were gathered into solidly packed groups, facing the platform with set faces.

Joyce Reade, smiling happily, advanced to the front of the platform and said: "I'm happy to say that I'm here to introduce Henry Prentice Newton, who is—"

"Get him up there!" A man shouted. "Stand up in front, Newt. We want to see you!"

"Yeah," a dozen voices roared together. "Get out from behind the petticoats."

Looking dazed, the middle-aged candidate stumbled forward and, the first heckler roared: "Now what's this about our voting for you if we want to keep our wives? Are you trying to break up our homes?"

"Wait, wait!" Newton lifted his arms beseechingly in a gesture for silence. "I—er—didn't know in advance about the speech made by Miss Poppy Reade. If I'd known I would have disapproved. The whole idea is mistaken—"

"Still hiding behind the petticoats! All right, where's Poppy Reade? We'll tell her."

Poppy shot to her feet and marched to the edge of the platform. "I'm here. Tell away!" she called.

A roar of mingled laughter and angry shouts went up. But again the leader of the hecklers made himself heard. "I didn't think a pretty girl'd try to destroy marriage and the home. You're making our wives treat us like enemies and we won't stand for it! But we're not going to be bullied into voting the way they want, either! "We're going to stay men even if every female in the country walks out on us. As for you—"

"Poppy," Joyce gripped her arm. "You've got to leave. They act—dangerous! Imagine threatening a girl!"

"No. I'm staying and I'll answer them, too!"

But Henry Newton caught her other arm. "You can't. They didn't come here meaning to harm anyone, but a crowd's liable to do anything. They might even forget you were a girl."

"I don't want to leave! I'll stick to everything I said!" But she was being propelled forcibly toward the steps, and with Newton acting as a shield to hide her from the view of the crowd, was hastily pushed into the jammed audience below.

As soon as she was free, she turned back, twisting violently against the pressure of the crowd. But someone else was halting her now. A hard arm had clamped around her shoulder and she was being drawn swiftly toward the exit. She dug her heels into the ground and halted, gasping: "Pete! You—"

"Yeah. This is no place to argue." And, he lifted her into his arms, somehow opened a way and carried her through the gates to the street.

"Put me down."

"Later. When you're plenty far away from here. I didn't think that crowd'd get so ugly."

"You thought?" she demanded. "This is hardly what *I* expected, either."

"If I'd had any idea—" But he broke off and reaching the sidewalk, put her down before a waiting buckboard.

"Get in. I'm taking you home—fast."

"You're not," said Poppy. "I told you last night—"

"Shut up, Poppy. I'm not trying to make love to you. I'm keeping you from getting hurt. Will you get in or shall I put you in?"

Her lips broke apart over her quick breath but she found no answering understanding in his eyes which, until now had seemed to offered warmth. She stepped up into the carriage and waited for him to get into the driver's seat.

He drove swiftly, not even slowing the horses as they took the hair pin curve of

ARE YOU BUYING
VICTORY BONDS?

High Butte hill. "Aunt Joyce'll wonder what's happened to me."

"No, she won't. She saw me taking you away. And she looked plenty relieved."

"Well, your advice wasn't exactly successful—"

A gun cracked through her words, sounding as if the bullet had been shot across the road just ahead of the horses. Pete jerked at the reins and sent the carriage to the edge of the trail. The gun spoke again and he said: "Get down on the floor. Quick."

As she dropped to her knees, she saw the Colt flip out of its holster into his hand. And she had a glimpse of his face which was dark and still with eyes chill and cold as the weapon he held.

"Is that enough?" A masculine voice demanded. "Or," the unseen man added, "do you want us to fill you full of lead?"

"What're you looking for?" Pete called.

"Just that girl—heard someone was driving her home. We cut across the range. Turn her over and there won't be any trouble."

Pete answered, swiftly, his Colt spitting at the point from which the voice had come. There was a harsh, queer sound like a broken word. But another gun roared from the opposite side of the road. "Two of 'em," Pete muttered and on the second shot his growling Colt spoke at the same instant.

There was a pause, then. Silence from the brush on either side of the road. And after seconds had crawled by, Pete got down, moving with an oddly balanced walk. The brush rustled and a man, his gun lowered to his side, stepped out onto the trail.

"Hold it, hombre. No sense in killing over this. We don't mean any harm to the girl. We'll keep her safe until the election's over. We just don't want her to egg our wives on to thinking we're insulting them if we don't vote for Newton and—" The voice broke off and turned nito a startled shout. "What're you doing here, Mack McClellan? Is that girl, Poppy Reade, with you?"

Pete spoke in a tone so low that she could not hear his words, but the other man's voice was still ringing through her brain. *Mack McClellan.* That was the Wyoming Progressive Party's candidate for mayor.

She got up from the floor and saw Pete and the other man standing in the middle of the wagon road.

"But Mack, what's the idea? Why're you mixed up with this woman's party outfit?"

"Simple enough," Pete's words were no longer quite low enough to muffle their meaning. "Every man's mixed up with some woman or other. This is my own particular mix-up."

The brush was moving again and the second man strode into the open, snapping disgustedly: "Of all the fool plays, Mack! Here we're trying to keep the women from ruining you and you're helping the girl who turned this into a battle between the sexes. Good night. . . . Come on, Joe."

They turned back and disappeared into the brush. As their ponies hoofs sounded, Poppy got out of the buckboard and walked up trail to Pete.

"So that's the way it is," she said. "You're Mack McClellan—and you wanted me to make that speech so that Mr. Newton would never have a chance. You knew the men wouldn't stand for it—that they'd figure they had to vote against him to prove they weren't bossed by their wives!"

"Yeah," he said. "But I didn't think it'd get as dangerous as it did. I'm sorry about that."

"You—you trickster!"

"Yeah." He repeated, "We couldn't let old Newt become mayor. We need some action in Greybull and I plan to get it."

"What you did was the worst sort of cheating. And I thought you were so real—so sincere!"

"I am," he said, and his hands closed on her arms and drew her to him. "I meant what I said Poppy. The thing between us is apart from everything else in the world."

He bent his head to find her lips but she said: "Is it? You behaved like a—a politician! If that's love—"

"Politics haven't anything to do with love," he explained, with his lips close to hers. "That's why I had to get you out of 'em."

"Still, you—"

His mouth stopped her words and she knew that she had not been mistaken. There was warmth and tenderness in his kiss, a blazing, protective fire on life's hearth.

CREATURE OF LOVE

SHE was a vibrant creature of love—half Spanish, half American . . . and all wolf! Her blonde Spanish beauty was unusual and as flawless as a sapphire. And now she was home again on her run-down ranch. She let her dark eyes rove over the secluded grape arbor and then let them linger on Nuncio, her lithe, handsome ranch-hand.

"Please," she said, and sat down at one of the benches drawn up to the wooden table. "I'm never happy with my shoes on. Take them off for me."

Nuncio knelt stiffly, and, as he bent to untie the shoes, the back of his neck colored angrily. "There," he said, taking them off and placing them under the bench. "Does the *Señorita* wish anything more? For a moment I forgot that I was only a hired—"

"Hush." She touched his cheek with light fingers. "Bring the wine and we'll drink."

"Right away." He hurried away.

Sina took off her hat, pulled the pins out of her hair, opened the braids and let the hair fall over her shoulders. She pulled up her skirts, and, stripping off the black silk stockings, pressed her feet gratefully into the cool, moist earth. It was heavenly to be home again.

Nuncio returned, poured the wine and handed her a glass. "Let's drink to our happiness," he said. "Sina, remember the last night—the night before you left?"

Her smile was slow. "No, we won't talk of that now." She drank and, her mouth wet with wine, let her smile grow.

With a sound which in a woman would have been a broken sob, he took her into his arms. His mouth found hers and she relaxed yieldingly against him, but only for a moment. Then she ended the kiss, saying: "That makes everything perfect. Home again, the sun, the earth under my bare feet, the wine—and you."

His arms dropped. "Sina! It's always like this. Don't you ever think of me as the man you love? Or is it always as part of a second or a—sensation?"

"I don't know," she said frankly. Suddenly she turned her head and met the gaze of a man standing there looking in the arbor at the two of them.

The stranger said: "Afternoon, Ma'am."

Nuncio faced the tall, range-clad stranger and asked: "Can we help you, *Señor?*" Nuncio's words were curt.

The stranger's gray eyes measured Nuncio and then dismissed him. He spoke to the girl. "I came in for a glass of wine. The sign out in front says you sell it."

"Of course," Sina said. "Bring a fresh bottle, Nuncio."

Nuncio stared angrily at the girl, then he turned sharply and silently left the arbor.

Sina raised her dark eyes to the gray-eyed stranger. "Sit down." She indicated a chair and slid herself onto the table. "You look as if you'd come quite a distance."

"Yes." The gray eyes went over her. "I'm hunting for a ranch to buy."

"You haven't been in California long?"

"No, Ma'am. I'm from Texas. My name's Neil Clark."

She stirred and, as she leaned toward him, her lips parted. He *must* see her and be aware of her! What kind of a man could fail to respond to her as she was now with her beauty made intimate by her loose hair and the bare white feet? She poured a glass of wine for him, then lifted her own. She let his gray glance take hers again and lifted the glass to touch the red wine with her lips in a gesture as sensuous as a caress.

Before she knew he had moved, his hands closed on her shoulders and pulled her close. Holding her like that, without taking her into his arms, he kissed her wine-wet mouth.

It was she who broke away. The glass fell, spilling the wine over her dress. Her hands clenched into fists as they struck out at him. "You—misunderstood me!"

The gray-eyed cowboy said: "No, Ma'am, I didn't misunderstand you." There was cool amusement in his eyes.

Sina knew that he was laughing at her!

The complete, exciting story of Sina, Neil Clark and the hot-blooded Nuncio will be told by Marian O'Hearn in her sparkling novel—"Señorita Wolf!"—in the next issue . . . published Dec. 26th.

The Editor.

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

"A certain trail to *his* heart, my dear,
Is by way of skillet and stove . . ."

This old-time advice is rooted in fact, a truth it is well to consider. And no state of contentment exceeds that brought about by the satisfying of hunger. Some foods and certain methods of their preparation seem to make special appeal to the appetites of men, for which reason the following recipes have been chosen. Try them, girls, and see if they don't bring luck!

MARYLAND BEEF TONGUE

is an easy dish to prepare, yet rather an uncommon method of cooking. Be sure the tongue is fresh, scrub it thoroughly and put to cook in water enough to cover. Simmer until tender, which will be for about three hours. Remove from the water, skin tongue and trim root end. To one cup of the liquid in which it has been cooked add one cup of brown sugar, one cup of stewed cranberries, half a tablespoon of whole cloves, a quarter of a cup of butter and a slice of lemon. Simmer the tongue in this mixture for fifteen to twenty minutes. The meat is delicious hot, or used in sandwiches.

VEAL HEARTS WITH NOODLES

are also a bit out of the ordinary. An excellent dish for a cold day, too. Clean two hearts, removing the membrane and large veins. Cut into half inch cubes. Put two tablespoons of fat and two tablespoons of flour in a skillet and brown. Stir into this six tablespoons of vinegar, two tablespoons of sugar, a teaspoon of salt and half a teaspoon of pepper, one small onion, chopped, and three cups of water. Add the cubed hearts, cover and simmer for about an

hour and a half, or until meat is tender. If mixture becomes too thick, add a little water as needed. Serve in the center of a noodle ring or add about two cupfuls of boiled noodles to the meat mixture just before serving.

KIDNEY, SPANISH STYLE

is a mighty tasty dish. To prepare, take one beef, or three pairs of lamb or pork kidneys. Cut beef kidney into half a dozen pieces, split others in two. Remove tubes and bits of fat and soak kidney pieces in cold water for thirty minutes. Place six slices of tomato in a well greased frying pan, on each a piece of kidney and a slice of bacon atop. Broil under moderate heat for ten minutes, then cover, set over direct heat and simmer a few minutes, until kidney is thoroughly tender. Many camps today are equipped with portable gas stoves and ovens which permit broiling. If you haven't that kind, or must depend upon an open fire, fry the kidney pieces lightly before putting them on the tomato slices and proceed as above.

SWEETBREADS

are regarded by many as a very tempting dish. A little care in preparation will insure their tastiness. First they should be soaked in cold water for half an hour. Then parboil for twenty minutes in a quart of water to which has been added a teaspoon of salt and a tablespoon of vinegar. This quantity is sufficient for two pairs of the sweetbreads. When they have been parboiled, slice the sweetbreads, dip into beaten egg, then cracker crumbs and brown them in hot fat. Remove to a heated platter. Stir flour into two tablespoons of the fat in which sweetbreads have been cooked. When smooth, add one cup of milk season to taste with salt and pepper and cook until thickened. Pour this gravy over the sweetbreads and serve.

VEAL COLLOPS

are decidedly appetizing at any season and a number prefer them to fried chicken. They may be cooked with small effort and in a few minutes, which is an added advantage. Cut two pounds of veal into pieces the size of an oyster. Dip these into beaten egg, then roll in cracker crumbs, season well with salt and pepper and fry in deep fat. Try serving these with Spanish rice and see if you don't get plenty of requests for "more!"

MONTANA VEAL CHOPS

These are really *good*. And they are another of those meat dishes I have heard several men declare they infinitely prefer to chicken. They're easy to cook, girls, and just the thing for a hungry man, whether he's eating in camp or in a city apartment. Have six veal chops of steaks cut medium thick. Sprinkle on both sides with salt and pepper. Beat two eggs lightly. Dip veal pieces into the egg, then into flour. Brown on both sides in hot bacon drippings. About three tablespoons full will be sufficient. When meat is browned, cover and cook very slowly until the chops are tender. This will require about an hour. Sprinkle with a little lemon juice and place on a hot platter. Mix one tablespoon of flour with the hot bacon fat remaining in the pan, then slowly add one cup of thick, sour cream. Stir constantly and cook for three minutes. Season with paprika and pour over the veal. If you like the flavor of onions, slice a medium-sized onion thinly and place on top of the meat when you cover that to cook after it has been browned.

ROUGH, TOUGH and GLAMOROUS

By Kenneth Fowler

Salty little Arly went all-out to out-glamour a gorgeous Eastern girl.

ARLY WELLS was wishing now she had taken time to scrub the smudge off the top of her small, snubby nose, and wishing, too, that she might have scrubbed off that pixyish little band of freckles that arched perversely across it. Harve, her brother, and old Biscuit Burdette, the roundup cook, liked to plague her by claiming that freckles had a natural affinity for that kind of a nose, a compliment of somewhat dubious merit and one which invariably made Arly madder than a stump-tailed bull in fly time.

But what particularly aroused Arly's dander at this moment was the sight of Dave Rocklin riding up the grassy draw below Cinch Buckle with that painted-up hussy of a Gilda Marvin in tow. She had seen all she wanted of the new owner of the Double M Connected at yesterday's roundup of the Pike County Cattlemen's Association, when she had lone-handedly repped for their little Cinch Buckle.

Gilda Marvin had made an utter fool of herself at the roundup, which was perfectly all right with Arly. What was *not* all right was Dave Rocklin's dumb, sheep-like obliviousness of the fact!

Arly had heard, through Dave, that a Miss Marvin, niece of old Hezekiah Marvin and new owner of the Double M Connected, was coming here from the East to take personal charge of the big spread. But she had pictured Miss Marvin as an elderly female facsimile of the late Hezekiah, a wizened, crabbed old lady in black bombazine, sharp of eye and tongue, and, in the best Marvin tradition, a rawhide martinet.

Dave, too, Arly knew, had fearsomely anticipated a female edition of the late Hezy, and had been as dumbfounded as she had been when Gilda Marvin had descended regally from the train at Dobe Junction, accompanied by a nastily yipping Airdale, a petulant smile, and enough personal baggage to fill a freight car.

Bitterly, Arly remembered how Dave's jaw had sagged when this dizzying, dark-haired beauty had stepped mincingly down to the dusty platform, and, with skirts fastidiously lifted, had asked haughtily for "Mr. Rocklin."

Gilda Marvin, despite her long, wearying ride across half a continent, had looked as fresh and crisp as if she had just stepped elegantly out of her own boudoir. Arly had noted, with instant instinctive resentment, the tight, revealing bodice, the artfully tinted cheeks, and the dark, lustrous hair—brushed back, sleek and black as a crow's wing, above the delicate shell-pink tips of the ear lobes.

Nor had Arly missed the gleam that had lighted Gilda Marvin's sultry amber-toned eyes when they had fallen on the tall, easy-gaited figure of Dave Rocklin pushing towards her through the crowd. She had given Dave a quick, favoring smile.

"I'm sure you must be Dave Rocklin," she had said in a voice that had husky little tremolos in it, and, to Arly, the faintest slight note of condescension.

"Yes *Ma'am!*" Dave had grinned, and then as an apparent afterthought had mentioned: "Oh, this is Arly Wells, Miss Marvin—your nearest neighbor, at Cinch Buckle. Reckon you two will be seein' quite a bit of each other, off and on."

Arly had said, "Hello," and Gilda Marvin had arched her delicately curved eyebrows.

"Oh, how do you do," she had said, and the brown eyes had suddenly turned remote taking in Arly's pint-sized, Levi-clad figure, from the tips of her old, scuffed-out boots to the rumple of buttercup-colored hair

"Lookee, Dave—our little cowgirl . . . all dressed up like a honkatonk doll!"

fluffing out from the brim of her worn, casually tilted back Stetson.

With that she had returned her glance to Dave, an expression of mock dismay crinkling her slender, aristocratic nose.

"Heavens, Mr. Rocklin, don't tell me I must wear a costume like that to be considered an authentic cowgirl!"

Arly had felt a slow flush burning her cheeks under the politely cloaked insult.

"I imagine," she had retorted with deliberate malice, "it might look as out of place in New York as yours does here in Dobe Junction, Miss Marvin," and had taken a momentary spiteful satisfaction as Gilda Marvin's dark eyes had flashed.

After that, Dave had seemed actually relieved when she had left them, although it had been his original intention to have her ride back to the Double M Connected with them in the buckboard.

But three days later she had run into Gilda Marvin again, at the Association roundup. This time, however, it had been cantankerous, blunt-spoken old Biscuit Burdette, veteran roundup cook for the Double M Connected, who had spoken his piece, with results that had left the new owner of the spread all but speechless with indignation.

Gilda Marvin had come riding impressively up to the chuck wagon on a prettily stepping palomino, followed by the pet Airdale. This time she was dressed for riding, but except for the tan whipcord jodhpurs snugging her slender hips, her costume was strictly for display purposes. A bright canary-yellow sweater frankly molded her smooth curves, and the slim column of her throat was circled by an ornate neckerchief of black silk, embroidered in yellow with the initials, "G.M." Her shiny patent-leather boots were similarly initialed on their embroidered flaps, and a new, pearl-gray Stetson was slanted down rakishly across her dark, sultry eyes.

RLY, seeing the Airdale and also seeing big Jeff Hilton, rep for the J-Hook, riding gloweringly towards the Double M's new owner, had acted impulsively, prompted by an instinctive desire to be neighborly. She intercepted Gilda Marvin before Jeff could reach her and said: "I thought I'd better warn you, Miss Marvin. Dogs aren't welcome at roundups. The cattle mistake them for kiyotes and get spooked."

Gilda Marvin reined up the palomino, giving Arly a curt glance.

"Puggsy," she responded coldly, "is welcome wherever I care to take him, Miss Wells," and then before Arly could put in another word, Jeff Hilton had ridden up.

The J-Hook's rep spoke with blunt finality. "You'll have to tie up that ketch dog, Ma'am. We can't take a chance on boogerin' the steers."

Gilda Marvin's patrician chin tilted arrogantly. "Well! On my own land, I'm told what I can do about my own dog! We'll see what Dave Rocklin has to say about this."

Jeff Hilton said imperturbably: "This may be your land, Ma'am, but it's a cooperative roundup, and Association rules are in force. Rocklin will tell you the same thing, you ask him."

Arly felt a sick pang as she saw Gilda Marvin's expression undergo a swift change at mention of Dave Rocklin's name.

"Well, of course, if Mr. Rocklin considers it necessary. . . ." Then she was down from the palomino, and without a backward glance at either Arly or Jeff Hilton, led it by the bridle across to the chuck wagon, where she calmly tied it to one of the back wheels.

She hadn't noticed the expression of utter incredulity that had crossed Biscuit Burdette's gnarled visage when she had hitched the palomino to his chuck wagon, but Arly had, and now Arly watchfully sat her saddle, a grim, anticipated little smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

She hadn't long to wait. Deliberately, Biscuit Burdette put down his big fork on the extended leaf of the chuck box and strode around to the tail-gate of the wagon. He untied the palomino and slapped it sharply across the rump. The remuda was in sight, and mechanically the horse started walking towards it, head canted sideways to avoid trodding on the dragging reins.

Gilda Marvin had gone back for the Airdale, but now, seeing the palomino walking indifferently past her, she whirled. "Who turned that horse loose?" she cried furiously.

Biscuit Burdette said, "I did," and calmly lifted his Dutch oven out of the fire's

hot bed of coals with a long iron pot hook.

"Very well. Then you can just go and bring him back!" snapped Gilda Marvin.

The cook busied himself with the Dutch oven, not even looking up.

Gilda stamped her foot. "Did you hear me? I said you can go and bring my horse back—immediately!"

Biscuit Burdette's blue, frosty eyes had grown bright and hard. "I heerd ye all right," he growled. "But I ain't the hoss wrangler in this outfit; I'm the cook," and he deliberately turned his back on her.

Dark eyes flashing, Gilda Marvin strode across to him. Puggsy trotted after her, pausing here and there to sniff noisily at the cook's pots and kettles scattered about on the ground.

"Furthermore," said Biscuit, without looking up from his oven, "ketch dogs ain't wanted around the chuck wagon. Not around mine, leastways."

"Are you going for my horse?" asked Gilda Marvin tensely.

Biscuit calmly spat. "Nope. I h'ain't."

"Then you're fired!"

"Ma'am," said Biscuit Burdette, calmly untying his apron, "I fired myself from this job five minutes ago."

Arly's mouth twisted in a bitter little smile as she kneed her sorrel around. She was halfway to the remuda when she saw Dave Rocklin bearing down on her, his dark, sun-burnished face set in a scowl. A quick glance at the chuck wagon had told him everything.

He halted his grulla beside her. "You might have warned her," he said harshly. "She's new to all this, you know."

Arly's gaze hardened. "I did warn her. She went ahead anyway."

"Why can't you two be more neighborly?" Dave bluntly went on, heedless of the storm clouds gathering in Arly's blue-gray eyes. "If you'd just try to be—"

"*Me* try! Why can't *I* be neighborly!" Arly's short laugh was bitter. "You must be wearing blinders these days, Dave!"

"You're imagining things." Dave Rocklin's tone was stiffly cool suddenly. "Gilda will do all right, if a few people would just learn to—"

"So, it's Gilda, now!"

Dave flushed. "At least she's not a jealous little hot-head like one certain party I could mention."

Arly's voice shook. "I think we'd better cancel our date for the dance Saturday night, Dave. Naturally you wouldn't want to be seen there in the company of a nasty little hot-head!"

"Now look, Arly—"

But Arly, her lips compressed rigidly, had already gigged her horse and wheeled away.

All this was a quickened, bitterly reawakened pain in Arly now as she watched Dave and Gilda Marvin riding up the draw towards the Cinch Buckle front veranda. Arly stepped through the doorway out to the porch.

And in spite of her resolve to maintain an attitude of cool unconcern towards Dave Rocklin, a sickening twist of pain ran through her as she saw Dave swing out of the saddle and with a gesture of casual familiarity hold up his arm to give Gilda Marvin a hand down. Arly braced herself at the newel post.

"What a cute little cabin!" gushed Gilda Marvin, as they came up together. "Hello, Arly," she added with easy nonchalance.

Arly said, "Hello," and swung her stiff glance to Dave Rocklin. She didn't invite them to sit down, and felt a wicked little stab of pleasure as she saw Dave's glance travel uncomfortably up to the porch chairs.

"Miss Marvin," he began awkwardly, "wanted to talk to you on a little matter of business, Arly."

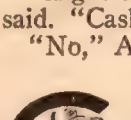
"I wondered," Arly said, "if this could be a social call," and saw Gilda Marvin's red mouth tighten coldly under the snub.

"I guess we may as well come to the point, Dave," Gilda said, and faced Arly deliberately. "The Double M wants to increase its holdings," she said. "This is a nice little spread you have here. I've come to make you an offer on it."

"Well, why don't you?" Arly said.

"Eight thousand dollars," Gilda Marvin said. "Cash."

"No," Arly said.



GILDA MARVIN frowned. She looked at Dave, an impatient expression of surprise hardening her pouted mouth. "Ten, then," she said, an edge of anger creeping into her voice. "It's not worth it, but I didn't come here to haggle with you."

Arly's voice had a goading softness. "If it's not worth it, why offer it?"

Dave interjected angrily: "Look, Arly, you know that's a fine offer! Why, in the open market you couldn't get half—"

Arly cut in coolly: "I might take half—if I wanted to sell. I don't."

Gilda Marvin abruptly wheeled and strode to her horse. "Come on, Dave," she called back tensely across her shoulder. "We're just wasting our time."

Dave Rocklin hesitated, facing Arly awkwardly, an embarrassing silence holding between them.

"Well, you heard her," Arly said finally. "Why don't you go?"

Dave reddened. "You know why. You're being a stupid little fool! What's got into you lately?"

"That's what I've been wondering about you, Dave."

"Dave!" Gilda called sharply. She was up on her horse, her glance going to Dave impatiently.

"Is that the way you mind?" Arly taunted.

Dave cried in a tight, furious voice, "All right, be a fool then!" and jerked around.

Arly held her casual, indifferent posture at the newel post until they had swung around and were headed back towards the Double M Connected. Then she went up to the porch and sank into a chair, feeling limp as a rag suddenly.

Slow footsteps sounded from the hallway; then the screen door opened and Harve Wells stepped out onto the porch, leaning heavily on his home-made cane.

Harve had Arly's freckles and blond complexion, but his broad, emiable face was set now in a somber expression.

"Well, I heard the offer," he said. "Mighty generous of Miss Fuss and Feathers, wasn't it?"

Arly looked up. "Harve, I—I'd die before I'd sell Cinch Buckle to that—that—"

"Don't say it. It wouldn't be ladylike," Harve cut through grimly. His hand dropped down, squeezed her shoulder. "Everything off between you and Dave?" he asked quietly.

"We're not going to the dance Saturday, if that's what you mean."

"You know what I mean, sprout."

"I—oh, let's not talk about it, Harve!"

"Sure, kid; if you'd rather not. But if I was you, I wouldn't let her get away with it." Harve's brows knitted thoughtfully. "Dave given up the idea of buyin' Arch Dunham's Bearpaw?"

"Arch is still in Detroit, I thought."

"Be back Friday or Saturday, I hear. Sure wish we could afford to tie that little spread onto Cinch Buckle. But we can't."

"We certainly could use the Bearpaw springs in the dry season," Arly murmured thoughtfully. "And so could the Double M. They're worse off for water than we are."

Harve shrugged resignedly. "Arly, I hired Biscuit Burdette."

"Biscuit!" Arly looked surprised.

"I know," Harve said. "He's old and stove-up and full of the miseries, but—"

"Harve, where is Biscuit now?" Arly interrupted eagerly.

Harve seemed puzzled. "Out at the barn, I guess. Why?"

"Don't ask me any questions—yet," Arly answered mysteriously. And then, with Harve staring after her wonderingly, she was out of the chair and down from the porch, moving with swift, purposeful strides out towards the barn.

* * *

Arly felt miserable, and so too, she guessed, did Jeff Hilton. She had come here to the Saturday night shivaree at the Gay Rose Cantina with Jeff, hoping only to see Dave Rocklin, and to be seen by him. But it looked now as if she had been mistaken in her belief that Dave would come to the dance with Gilda Marvin. Neither was here, and the dance was already half over.

To make it worse, she had deceived Jeff. He knew now, of course, that she had used him as a convenience; and while he hadn't been bitter about it, there could be no real pleasure in this for either of them, and Jeff had been excusing himself more and more often to go downstairs to the bar.

Now, Arly was afraid he would be too drunk to drive her home in the buckboard they had left outside, in the wagon shed. And the severe storm that had risen suddenly, just after the dance had begun, seemed to be growing worse.

Here in the ladies' room, where she was nervously waiting while Jeff made another of his periodic visitations to the bar, Arly contemplated herself in the big, gilt-framed

mirror. The reflection startled her. This new evening dress she had bought yesterday in Dobe Junction had drawn disapproving glances from some of the older women at the dance.

She had never cared much about dresses or the usual feminine frou-frou; she preferred going about in an old pair of Levis, or her jodhpurs, and whenever she had worn dresses, on trips into town, they were simple, modest frocks, too strictly proper to excite a second glance. But this!

I must have been crazy, Arly thought, studying this total stranger staring disconcertingly back at her from the mirror. The new dress, of sleek, ice-blue satin, did cover her body, but it left little to one's imagination. And for the first time in her life, her fluttery tomboy hair was not allowed to run riot; it was smoothed slickly back down her from forehead in a rich, honey-colored sheen, and her cheeks and mouth were reddened daringly.

No wonder they were all staring at me so, Arly thought with a sudden hot feeling of shame, and then wondered what Dave would think, if he could see her this way. Her mouth hardened grimly. What did that matter, now? Dave wasn't here to see her, and after tonight her name would be on the tongue of every gossiping old biddy in Dobe Junction. Heads would be nodded sagely over town back fences and low, furtive voices would say Arly Wells had gone to the devil for sure!

The storm seemed to be increasing in intensity; wind was whipping the rain against the flimsy clapboards of the Gay Rose in savage gusts. The old cottonwood at the back entrance was bent low under the heave and slash of it. Arly never remembered just when or how she made up her mind to leave; but the next thing she knew she was out in the wagon shed. She bundled herself in Harve's old slicker, which he had luckily left in the buckboard. Then, with a dull, aching pain building up in the pit of her stomach, she was driving out into the teeth of the storm.

It was blowing a gale now, and the rain was a deluge by the time she had left the town lights behind her and was taking the old wood road that led downward through the darkness to Lame Johnny Creek.

At the bottom of Two-Mile Hill she came to an abrupt halt. The bridge over the creek had been torn loose from the east bank and the dark, swirling water was sucking around it greedily. For a moment, Arly considered leading the horse out onto the swaying wooden span, and then on across, but she vetoed the idea almost instantly. The water was rising by the minute. She might never make it.

Then she thought of the old Double M Connected line cabin, a mile farther back in the Poco Pisadas, and decided to try for that. There was a ford a mile below the bridge, where ordinarily the water was shallow enough for wagons to cross, but tonight even the ford would be a raging torrent. She huddled lower in the soggy seat of the buckboard and quickly wheeled around.

SHE was thinking of Dave, all she and Dave might have meant to each other, as she let the horse have its head up the steep, dark trail to the line camp. Dave had talked of buying the Bearpaw, for himself and her, before the arrival of Gilda Marvin. He had promised her he would stay on as Double M Connected foreman only until the new owner could find a replacement for him. But that—Arly's reflections turned bitter—was before he had discovered that the new owner was Gilda Marvin. Since then. . . .

Arly's thought stopped abruptly. The line cabin was directly ahead of her. *And there was light showing through the rain-streaked windows!*

She got out and hitched the horse, then, with a sick feeling of foreboding, went on up to the cabin and knocked. There was a long wait. She heard voices, low-pitched and tense; then came a quick rustling about, and finally, after a strangely long interval, a sound of footsteps.

The door swung open. Dave Rocklin stood there, in shirtsleeves. He stared at her with an expression of open-mouthed shock, "Arly!"

She found her voice with an effort, finally. "Dave! What on earth—"

"You'd better come in." His voice had a strange, level flatness and he seemed to step back reluctantly to let her pass. In the next moment, she knew why. Gilda Marvin

sat coiled in a chair. A bottle of whiskey stood on an upturned box beside her, and she stared at Arly out of sharp, preternaturally bright eyes.

"Well, look who's here!" she cried in an unnaturally loud tone. "Lookee, Dave—our little cowgirl . . . all dressed up like a honkatonk doll!"

Arly's heart sank.

Dave turned on Gilda savagely. "Cut it!" he snapped. "And you've guzzled enough of that stuff for one night. Lay off it!"

Gilda Marvin stared tipsily at Arly. "See?" she laughed. "He wants to reform me. He—hic!—he wouldn't want to reform me if he wasn't in love, now would he?"

Arly said in a brittle voice: "The bridge over Lame Johnny was out. Otherwise I wouldn't have—"

Dave cut in, with a strained eagerness: "We know! We were on our way to the dance. We'd just gotten across it when—"

"Now, deeer!" Gilda cooed. "Arly's grown up. We don't have to teach her the facts of life."

Abruptly, Dave strode to the box and snatched up the half empty bottle. "I told you not to bring that," he bit out angrily, and hurled it into the fireplace. "Now sober up," he gritted. "You've gone far enough."

He turned to Arly. "You'd better get off those wet things. I'd have had a fire, but there's no dry wood, and—"

Arly walked deliberately to a shelf where an extra lantern stood. She lighted it. "I'll get some wood," she said.

"Well!" Gilda Marvin said. "Now we're getting some place. *She'll* get wood—do you hear that, Davey darling? The little wonder-lady will get wood, if you couldn't."

Arly went out, her stomach coiled in a sickening knot. Five minutes later she was back, carrying an armful of dry wood. Dave stared, dumbfounded.

"Where the devil did you find that?" he blurted.

There was a catch in Arly's voice. "Have you forgotten Lost Dutchman cave, Dave—where we played when we were kids?"

Dave said huskily: "I—I'd forgotten," and then watched in a kind of paralyzed wonderment, as Arly broke twigs for kindling, then carefully lighted them and began crossing the rising flames with heavier branches. The fire began to crackle. An aromatic incense of woodsmoke filtered into the room's dampness.

Gilda Marvin snuggled comfortably in her chair. "Well, now, isn't this cozy," she said. "Maid service and everything, Dave!"

Dave Rocklin ignored her. He turned to Arly as she rose, flushed, from the now blazing fire. For a moment he stared at her wonderingly as her wet slicker fell open, revealing the low-cut satin evening frock.

"You—you went to the dance?" he managed in a dazed voice, finally.

"And why shouldn't I have?" asked Arly coolly. "I have two perfectly good legs. Tonight I felt like using them—to dance."

Gilda Marvin extended a long, shapely leg. "I have legs too—see?" she said, wiggling a silk-slippered foot at Arly. "Don't you think I have pretty legs, Arly dear?"

Dave flushed, "Arly," he blurted, "I'm going to buy Bearpaw, in the morning. Arch Dunham is back. He—"

Arly sank down on the bunk opposite Gilda. "Are you?" she said stonily. "It really doesn't interest me."

"But it does me!" Gilda Marvin was suddenly sitting straight. She seemed all at once completely sobered. "Dave," she said sharply, "you didn't tell me Arch Dunham was back. The Double M is getting Bearpaw, you know."

Dave eyed her strangely. "Is it?" he said softly.

"So you think you can compete with Double M?" All the velvet was gone from Gilda Marvin now. "Don't be a damned fool, Dave!"

"I won't be." Dave's voice was flat. "Not any more."

Arly took off her wet slippers and placed them in front of the fire to dry. Dave walked across to her. "I'll take your wet coat, Arly."

"Thank you, I don't need any help."

"Now, Arly! I admit I've been a locoed fool, but—"

Arly's heart pounded. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know damned well what I'm talking about." Dave's voice was huskily flat. "Arly—" His arm went out to her.

She wrenched away from him. "Please, Dave! I'm just an intruder here—"

She broke off as a sudden muffled drum of hoofbeats sounded from outside the door. At the same instant she was aware of Dave's glance startledly sweeping the room.

"Gilda!" he blurted, staring back at her tensely. "She's gone!"

"I'm sorry—for your sake," Arly said smugly.

"Damn it, Arly!" Dave rushed a harried glance at her. "Why can't you—" Then, with a savage abruptness, he had grabbed up his hat and slicker and was hurrying for the door. "You stay here till I get back," he flung harshly across his shoulder. "She's going to try and ford Lame Johnny!"

Ford Lame Johnny! For a shocked moment, Arly couldn't make sense of it. Then she knew. Gilda Marvin was starting a race back to town—to Arch Dunham's. She wanted to get there first—wanted to get her name on an option to the Bearpaw ahead of either herself or Dave Rocklin!

Arly had only a dreamlike remembrance of the rest of it. But somehow she had succeeded in negotiating that narrow, rutted trail, slippery as grease with yellow mud, in the buckboard. And she had reached the washed-out bridge in time to hear a horse snorting and splashing about wildly somewhere out in mid-stream.

At the same moment she heard Dave's voice, desperately urging it on, and from a farther distance the faint, mocking sound of a woman's laughter, followed by a fading drum-beat of hoofs from the opposite side of the creek.

Tensely, Arly stepped from the buckboard and sank to her ankles in creamy mud. "Dave!" she called out urgently. "Dave—are you all right?"

At that instant, a startling snort burst out of the silence from her left and a foundered horse came pawing up the bank in frenzied, jerky lunges, nickering in fright. Arly gasped. The horse was Dave's big grulla—and its saddle was empty!

A dizzy fear gripped Arly as she fought her way to the bank. The relentless mud sucked at her feet and held her back, but she reached the edge of the stream finally and strained her eyes against the encompassing murk.

"Dave!" she cried out again, her voice tight with panic. "Dave, it's Arly! *Dave!*"

Then she heard it—Dave's voice, answering weakly above the swelling roar of the current.

"Out here, Arly! My—my foot's caught in a snag or something!"

The rest was a nightmare—an unbelievable nightmare that didn't seem real even after they had driven back to the cabin in the buckboard, and she had bound up Dave's swollen, painfully lacerated ankle with swatches of satin cut from her mangled muddy new party dress.

Somehow, she had quieted Dave's grulla; had ridden him out into that dark, turgid channel of Lame Johnny Creek, where she had succeeded, finally, in freeing Dave's foot, which had been wedged against a rock by a heavy tree snag. Then they had swum the horse back to shore, and had come in the buckboard back to the cabin.

Now, seated together before the replenished fire, drying out, Arly felt a warm glow spreading through her tired body.

"You saved my bacon back there, Arly," Dave was saying in a slow, thoughtful voice. A hesitant grin broke the gravity of his face. "It's lucky for me you don't mind good. If you'd stayed up here—"

"Someone would have come along," Arly cut him off quickly. She felt ridiculous, now, in this ruined, mud-splattered party dress, but Dave was looking at her in a way that sent a hot flush riding to her cheeks. She felt as exposed as if she were wearing a pair of tights; at the same time, strangely, she didn't seem to care especially as she noticed the attention in Dave's eyes deepen and soften.

"You—you look wonderful tonight, Arly," he breathed.

"But not as wonderful as Gilda Marvin."

"I guess I deserved that, Arly. But you made me so blasted sore out there at the round-up, that day. I thought maybe that if I made you jealous—"

"But you tried to get me to sell the Cinch Buckle," Arly interrupted.

"Only because Gilda Marvin was ready to offer you twice what it was worth! I thought we could—"

"And you came here tonight to this cabin with her," Arly pressed relentlessly.

Dave flushed. "We were on our way to the dance, Arly. She kept fussing at me till I had to agree to take her. Then the

(Please continue on page 96)

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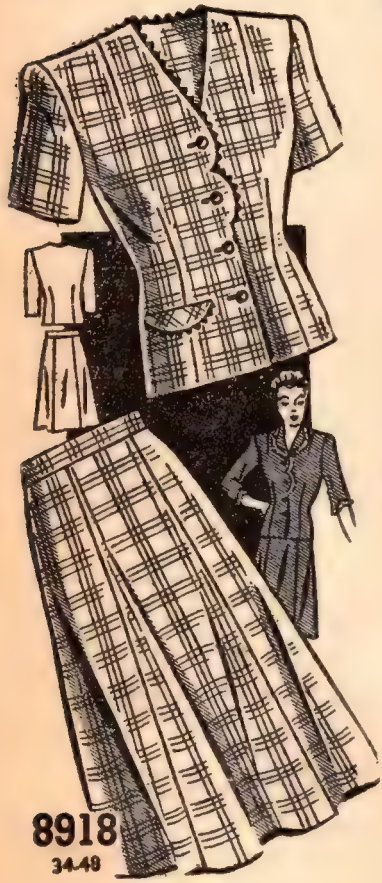

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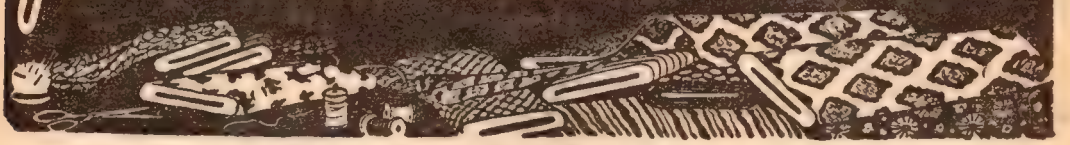

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By Isabel Stewart Way

CHAPTER ONE

Keep My Secret!

SHE wondered, as she did the supper dishes, how a girl could be so happy and so sad, all at once—how she could want to laugh and to cry, all in the same breath. Yet that's the way it was with Nona McShane.

She looked over at him now, as she dried the worn silverware. Handsome, happy-go-lucky Pop was sitting in the rocking-chair, his dark curly head thrown back, while he fiddled a tune to fit his own gay mood. Pop was happy and good-natured—except when the name of Lucas was mentioned. Nona shivered a little now, remembering the black temper that would fill Pop when he found out about her and Jim Lucas.

The door to the kitchen-bedroom opened,

A PRETTY FEUDIST!

Ernie laughed loudly. "After last Saturday night, I got an interest in this family. . . ."

and seventeen-year-old Thesby stood there in her new white dress. She smiled at them all, whirled around, the ruffles of her long skirt swirling about her slim ankles.

"Will I catch me a beau at the dance, do you think?" she demanded pertly.

"Ten beaus, if you want 'em!" Nona told her, and Nona's heart was warm with looking at this younger sister.

Thesby was lovely, with black curly hair

Nona had her own gay life to live and couldn't spare time from her lover's arms—to look after her wild young sister.

like Pop's, a face like a flower, and blue laughing eyes shaded by the longest darkest lashes ever seen. Nona felt ages older —and wiser—yet there were only two years between them. She'd spoiled Thesby ever since Mom had died, four years ago.

Thesby looked at Nona, and her eyes were suddenly grave. "I don't want ten beaus," Thesby said. "I want just one—if he's the right one." She turned back into the bedroom, closed the door.

Young Bud, fair and freckled and frowning, looked up from the old fishing-rod he was re-winding, pushed the cowlick of tow hair back from a disdainful brown eye.

"Boy-crazy, that Thesby!" he scoffed, his voice cracking as it so often did, these days. "Ain't got the gumption she was born with. . . . You oughta box her ears, Pop!"

Pop threw back his head and roared. "Just you wait, son! Two-three years more, and you'll be plumb gal-crazy. Moonin' around, singin' love-songs, lookin' like a wall-eyed calf."

"Betcha I don't!" Bud scowled harder. "My gosh, betcha I'll be out in Californy by that time, pannin' pure gold—or fightin' Injuns, mebby. Me, I got no time for women—'ceptin' them that was wished on me."

But Pop only chuckled. "You wait," he warned. "You just wait, son." Then, to Nona: "Best get dressed, honey. I'll take my fiddle and mosey on ahead, now. You and Thesby and Bud can come together. I'll leave the rig hitched for you."

Nona knew she ought to speak up then and tell Pop she wasn't going to the dance —that she was meeting Jim Lucas. But she couldn't say the words past her tight throat.

Pop cleared his throat. "Nona, there's somethin' else, honey. I hate to speak of it."

"Yes, Pop." She looked up, startled. *If he'd heard about her and Jim—*

"It's about Ernie Gage," Pop lowered his voice, "the way he hangs around Thesby. He's no good for her, Nona. You stay close to her tonight. She's needin' you, honey."

Nona clutched a tablespoon very tightly and looked at Pop as he packed his fiddle into the case. He would play at the dance tonight and had to start early. As she watched, a moil of rebellion rose in her. Why couldn't Pop look after Thesby? Why couldn't Thesby look after herself? Nona had a love and a life of her own!

As Pop left, he turned to Bud. "You put that rod away and get yourself fixed, son. You're drivin' your sisters over."

"Aw, gosh!" Bud wailed. "Do I have to? Them old dances!"

"Needn't more'n wash up, and put a clean shirt on," Pop told him. "You're a big boy now. Got to look after the womenfolks." He went on outside.

Nona took down the pink-checked gingham dress she'd washed and ironed that day, and turned into the bedroom she shared with Thesby. The other girl was looking at herself in the mirror, and she didn't turn. And all at once something caught at Nona, drowning out the rebellion. Maybe it was the soft glow in Thesby's face, or the new challenge in the sweet mouth—but whatever it was, Nona knew that Thesby was different.

She went up beside Thesby, stood there, looking into the mirror, too. Very different were the sisters: Nona, small, tanned, with yellow smooth hair and soft brown eyes, and a few freckles across her nose—Thesby, taller, with an exquisite creamy face and a beauty that was like a flame, drawing your eyes.

Nona spoke gently. "Thesby—you aren't liking Ernie Gage too well, are you, dear?"

Thesby whirled to face Nona. "What if I am?"

"Well—oh, I know he's attractive, dear. But he's a lot older than you, and he doesn't have a good name. Pop doesn't think he's straight, Thesby. He's worried."

Thesby's blue eyes flashed. "Sure, I heard what he said. Telling you to stay close to me—saying I needed you. All right, are you going to tie me to your apron strings at the dance tonight?" There was a mocking smile on the lovely lips, defiance in the straight gaze.

Nona felt her cheeks going ablaze. It was as if Thesby knew something—as if she were taunting Nona.

"Don't tell me," Thesby went on, "that you're *not* going to the dance tonight. That you're letting two innocents like Bud and me—go off by ourselves. Surely, *that* isn't in your mind, Nona."

Nona nodded. "Yes, I thought I'd stay home," she said, not meeting Thesby's eyes. "I don't care much for those dances. And—well—"

"Oh, I'm no fool!" Thesby broke in vehemently. "I know why you sneak off every evening, and go up into Mint Gulch. You're no angel, Nona McShane. If I should whisper a certain name to Pop—"

"Thes!" Nona gasped out. "You mean—"

"I mean—I saw you up there. In Jim Lucas's arms!"

Nona drew a quick breath, then was silent. If Thesby told that about Jim, before she'd had a chance to prepare Pop, there'd be trouble. And Thesby might do just that, if she didn't get her own way. Thesby was loveable—but she was headstrong and willful.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bargain

NONA stared at her sister—at the flashing eyes, the high-held dark head, the tight-drawn lovely mouth—trying to read her intentions. Trying to think what it would mean to her and Jim, if Thesby told the story now.

"Well?" Thesby asked, still with that scornful smile.

"You wouldn't, Thes," Nona said gently. "It would mean—"

"I know what it would mean," Thesby said stormily. Then, turning back to the mirror, "Oh, you needn't worry. It's none of my business. And I don't meddle in other folks' affairs—unless they meddle in mine. Just remember that, will you?"

Her face was so rebellious, so young, that Nona knew an ache in her heart. "Thesby," she said, "I'm not wanting to meddle. I only want what's best for you."

"I know what's best!" Thesby flared. Then, in her impulsive warm way: "Look, Nona. I want what's best for you, too. I think Jim Lucas is grand. That's why I haven't told Pop. And I won't—unless—" she paused.

"Unless?"

"Unless you spoil my good times. I tell you what, Sis," catching Nona's hand eagerly, "you go ahead and meet your Jim. I'll make excuses for you to Pop. He never notices who's there, anyhow, after he gets to playing and has a drink or so under his belt. And I'll make Bud keep still. Is it a bargain?"

She threw her arms about Nona, and Nona held her close, thinking: *If I go to the dance tonight, I can look after her—show Ernie Gage she's being protected. I could even tell him to leave her alone. He's a coward. He'd be afraid if I warned him. . . .*

Then she thought of Jim Lucas waiting, and her heart was not willing to be denied. A bit of rebellion came back, too. Why should she risk Jim's displeasure—for a wilful girl? Why couldn't Pop look after his own? And after all, Thesby was infant.

She kissed her sister's soft pink cheek. "All right, honey. But you've got to promise not to do anything reckless."

"As if I would!" Thesby laughed, and caught up her long wine-colored cape, ran out of the room. "Come on, Bud!" she called. "Pop left the rig for us!"

Nona was left alone. She didn't feel quite so happy as she slipped on the pink dress and brushed her hair. She had a fleeting wish to be as lovely as Thesby, then she thought, "But Jim likes me this way. I don't care how I look as long as I'm his girl." And her heart sang again as she went outside, and down-canyon to a little side trail that led into the narrow high walled gully that was their meeting-place.

She hated meeting Jim secretly like this—and Jim hated it, too. But it was the only way—for the enmity between Pop and Jim's uncle was long-lived and deep. It was an inherited enmity, really, and lately Nona realized the utter foolishness of it.

The folks in Gilead, with the nearest town was thirty miles away, had a world of their own. They had their mines, their sheep and cattle, their small ranches, in the small fertile arroyos that opened off the main canyon. They had their small settlement, with the General Store, blacksmith shop, a church, a schoolhouse, and two saloons. They had their griefs and gaieties—and, above all, their old, old enmities and hates.

It all started back there when Gramp McShane and old Eb Lucas fought bitterly over a mining claim. Gramp won, and from

that time on, was hated by the Lucas family and all who had lined up with him, for the whole canyon took sides. No Lucas or friend of a Lucas saw any good in the McShanes and their followers. Because—like Pop himself—Gramp McShane had been a born musician, and played for folks to dance, old Eb Lucas condemned all dances and came, in time, to frown upon all forms of entertainment in which a McShane took pleasure.

And the McShanes did their part, too, in widening the breach. They laughed at the Lucases, made sport of them, called them blue-noses; they stayed away from church because Eb Lucas made it his one diversion from work.

The way it turned out, the McShanes were more foolish than the Lucases, for theirs was a doubtful victory. The mine Gramp won was a good one, but not enough. It kept the family living easily, without too much work, so they put most of their thoughts on good times. And when the mine's output waned, they just hadn't acquired enough ambition to keep the wolf far from the door.

On the other hand, Eb Lucas had left mining and worked his ranch until his family became the most prosperous in the canyon. And now a Lucas had learned to love a McShane, and Jim was waiting just beyond.

At the head of the gully, where the walls leaned together in a crazy sort of jumble, a little waterfall misted over the rocks to be caught in a deep pool below, before it overflowed into the tiny stream that ran down to the main canyon river.

Mint and ferns grew about the pool. A flat boulder made the bench. And, standing there beside it, hands in pockets as he stared down into the pool, was the figure that made Nona's heart pulse warmly, till her breath was a pain in her throat.

Jim Lucas, tall and lean, with red hair always a bit tousled about his grave young face. A wide mouth, with lines etched about it; a strong mouth, showing purpose and determination—and a great deal of gentleness. Jim's eyes were gray, the dark gray of winter storm clouds, and they held golden lights, like sun rays shining through them. Usually Jim was serious—perhaps because he'd been raised to be that way—but when he smiled, in the quick flashing way Nona loved, then his whole face was lighted, as if a fire had been kindled deep within.

The tenderness that filled Nona was a warm caressing thing as she stood there, very still, etching every line of him deep in her heart.

"Jim! she called softly.

He turned and came toward her that made him seem even more dear.

"Nona," he said huskily, and took her into his arms. "Somehow, I was afraid you might not come tonight."

HE TILTED her face up to his, his mouth set full and hard against hers. She could feel the swift rapturous quickening of her heartbeats, as she became conscious of the intensity of his emotion. When he lifted his head, she still clung to him, shaken and weak and breathless.

He looked down at her and she saw the tenseness of his face, the deep flame in his eyes. Then he smiled in that quick way again, led her over to the rock-bench, drew her down beside him. For a long time they sat thus—as they so often did—his arm about her, her head on his shoulder. Nona felt as if the peace, the content, that was hers must never end.

After a time Jim spoke slowly. "It must have been meant this way from the beginning, Nona, for us. It seems so *right*—as if we've always been this way, close together. As if all the trouble between our folks had been blotted out. Queer, isn't it, honey? We've lived in Gilead Canyon always, went to the same school, yet we didn't know each other, at all. We scarce saw each other—till that day."

"It was meant, Jim. I know it!" Then they were silent again, while Nona's thoughts went back to that Sunday, a month ago, when she had first become conscious of Jim Lucas.

It was true that Nona and Jim had grown up together, yet were utter strangers, for even the school was divided into the McShane and the Lucas factions, and there was no common meeting ground. Jim Lucas was just a boy on the other side of the world to Nona.

Then came that Sunday, a month ago.

The night before, Nona had gone with her family to one of the Saturday night

dances, and there had been a fight between two of the men. They were no kin of the McShanes, those two brawlers, but it had left a dissatisfied feeling in Nona that she couldn't throw off. The next morning, after the breakfast things were done, she went for a long walk alone to clear the dark mood from her thoughts.

She had walked and walked, and found herself on the ridge above Mint Gully. The sight of the pool down there, shady and cool-looking, was an invitation, and she started down, thinking she'd find a trail farther down the rocky wall.

She did all right most of the way, but all at once a rock went out from under her feet and she felt herself tumbling. With startling clearness, she remembered that the pool was very deep and very cold—and that she couldn't swim a stroke.

Nona never knew whether or not she screamed, but the first recollection she had was a pair of arms catching her, holding her close—of looking into a pair of cloud-gray eyes and knowing that life was a swift changing thing.

They didn't recognize their love then, but they really saw each other for the first time—and liked what they saw. And before they parted, Nona promised to meet Jim there again.

They had kept on meeting each other. And then, last night, Jim had told Nona of his love, and asked her to be his wife.

"Yes," she'd told him frankly, "I do love you, Jim. But—we'll have to wait."

"How long?"

"I don't know. Only—you've got to make your uncle accept me. And I must make Pop understand. If we could bring him and your Uncle Eb together—"

"Not a chance." Jim shook his head. "And waiting'll do no good, Nona. Let's tell 'em, face it together. . . . I'll see your father tonight."

"Oh, no! He's not home." Nona was thinking of the father who was so kind, so tender—yet could be filled with black temper at a moment's notice. "Let me think it out, Jim. Just a little while longer."

Jim looked down at her now, and his eyes held a warm glow.

She felt a flame leaping in her heart. Without a word she again was tight in his arms. His lips were upon hers with an urgency that sent sharp thrills of rapture through her—rapture such as she'd never known . . . a glorious breathless moment, there in the moon-silvered glade above the crooning river.

All at once he drew a jerky breath, lifted his head. "We can't go on this way, Nona," he said hoarsely.

"Just for a little while, Jim."

"Look, sweet. Next Tuesday evening we're having a church supper at our home. All our kin-folks, our friends, will be there."

"That doesn't include the McShanes."

"It includes you, Nona. I'm calling for you at five."

She trembled as he caught her close, kissed her again. She said, in muffled tones: "Can't we go away, Jim, leave the canyon? Make a fresh start—somewhere else?"

"We could, but it wouldn't help, sweet. I'll call for you, Tuesday. And from then on, your folks and my folks—the whole canyon—will know we belong to each other."

CHAPTER THREE

An Unwelcome Guest

WE BELONG to each other—those were sweet words to Nona McShane. She repeated them to herself, over and over, as she waited at home that night for the others to come home from the dance.

Jim had taken her home. He had held her close in his arms, there on the porch.

"Let me tell your father tonight, Nona," he had tried again.

But she had said, "Please, not tonight, Jim."

She couldn't tell him that Pop would probably have too much to drink tonight, and without doubt be in a surly mood. So Jim had kissed her, and went away. And Nona waited there in the kitchen by the fire—and again she was all mixed up with joy and sadness.

She heard Pop's horse come down the lane. He was alone. There was no sound of the rig following, and that was all wrong. Pop always insisted on his family coming home before he did, or at least with him.

Nona met him at the door. "Where's Thesby?" she asked.

Pop scowled. His handsome face was

flushed, his eyes reddened. "She's comin' home with Bud!" he answered shortly. "Wouldn't come ahead—nor with me! The ungrateful little pests!" He swayed on into the bedroom he shared with Bud.

Nona went back into the kitchen, sank down in the chair. Something was very wrong, she knew. Bud was always eager to come home early. And now it was late. She turned down the lamp and waited there, hearing the kitchen clock tick the minutes away. Pop had come home at one o'clock. It was now half-past two.

She gave a sigh of relief when she heard the horse and buggy coming up the lane. She went over, opened the door, saw Bud —alone. Nona ran outside.

"Where's Thesby, Bud—?"

"Tell you later." He unhitched the horse, put it away, while Nona stood there, shaking, waiting.

At last he came up to her, walked up the porch steps, and his thin face was all strained and hollow-eyed.

"She went for a ride with Ernie Gage," he mumbled, "and they didn't come back. I didn't dast tell Pop, the way he was. So when he left, I said Thesby and I wanted to stay a while. I reckoned she'd be right back, so I waited. Then I tried to trail 'em, Nona. I unhitched the horse and rode bareback—and at last I thought mebby she'd come on home."

"No, Bud. She isn't here. "We've got to find her!"

"No use. I've been down every trail. I whistled and called. I even went around by Ernie's place. His rig ain't there—so I come on home."

Nona drew Bud inside. When she saw how his thin body was quivering, she heated some milk and made him drink it.

She said, "Pop's got to know!" She went in to wake him. But it was no use. Pop was sleeping like the dead.

Nona was heartsick as she came back into the kitchen. "You may as well go to bed, Bud," she said wearily. "There's nothing we can do till morning. They may have driven down to town—to get married." She turned a little sick as she realized that she was hoping just that.

"I don't wanna go to bed," Bud mumbled, and there was a look of anger on his thin freckled face as he looked through the open door into the bedroom, where Pop sprawled on the bed, snoring loudly. "I'm waitin' up with you, Nona."

She nodded, and they settled down to the long dreary watch. Nona tried to make conversation, but it was all no use. She tried to read. Then she got a book for Bud—and was glad when he nodded over it then dropped to sleep there at the table, his tow head pillowed on his arms.

Dawn came in the sudden way it always does to the canyon. All at once Nona got up from her chair, walked to the door—and saw Thesby coming.

Slim lovely Thesby, with her pretty white dress all muddied and torn, her wine-colored cape damp with mist, her dark curls all tousled, and her face defiant under the awful tiredness that had seemed to make her thin overnight.

Nona ran to meet Thesby, caught her close. "Oh, darling," she cried, "to know you're home again—safe!"

"Sure! What did you expect?" she asked defiantly, and tried to smile in her pert way.

But the smile broke, and Thesby crumpled in Nona's arms, sobbed out her story.

Ernie Gage had coaxed her to go for a ride in the moonlight. When she refused, he laughed, called her a child.

So Thesby, accepting the dare, had slipped away from the dance with Ernie. She hadn't been happy about it, even from the first. Maybe because she was frightened. And her fear grew to panic when Ernie had seized her roughly in his arms.

"I jumped out of the buggy," she told Nona, "and ran. He tried to follow me—but he'd been drinking . . . and fell. It was awful, Nona. I hid from him—kept to the shadows. After a while he went back. I—I'm sorry, Nona. I know now he's—just no good. I don't ever want to see him again."

"You don't need to see him again," Nona said as she drew her into the house. "And about this—no one'll ever know, darling."

NONA was glad that now she could throw the worry of Thesby from her mind. No harm had been done, and never had the younger girl been so sweet, so understanding.

"I wish I could help you—about Jim," Thesby told her. "I wish Pop didn't hate

Jim's folks so! What can you do about it, Nona?"

"I don't know!" and the turmoil was back again. "I've got to tell him before Tuesday. What'll happen, I just don't dare to think."

It was Thesby who told Pop, after all, that Tuesday afternoon. Nona heard their voices on the front porch, Pop's raised in anger. Thesby's just as defiant.

"She'll not set foot in the house of a Lucas!" Pop roared. "I'll tie her here, first!"

"Just as you've tied her, these past few years!" Thesby flung out. "Just as we've all tied her! Being selfish—talking all she's got and giving nothing back. Not even the right to be happy!"

"You hush—you little—"

"I'll not hush! You married Mom against her folk's will. I've heard you say so, yourself."

Nona hurried out there. At first she couldn't make herself heard, then they saw her and quieted.

Pop ground out, "So you're goin' against my wishes. You're takin' up with a low-down swindlin' Lucas!"

Nona said huskily. "I love him, Pop."

"And you've been meetin' him, underhanded! Sneakin' out—"

"How else could she meet him?" Thesby flared. "She couldn't bring him here—because of you! If she sneaked out to meet him—you drove her to it!"

"He's a Lucas!"

Thesby's blue eyes were scornful. "A Lucas! I'm sick of your ranting against them! At least—their children don't know shame because of their drunkenness, their shiftlessness!"

"Thesby!" Nona cried.

Thesby shrank back then, as if she'd been struck. "Pop, I'm sorry," she said. "I'm awful sorry."

He didn't answer. Just took out his pipe and began filling it from his tobacco sack, tamping it down carefully. Nona saw the way his hand was shaking. Pop had never been like this before. He'd always seemed so young, so sure of himself. Now his shoulders were slumped, he looked old and tired.

He said, "Reckon my girls ain't needin' me much, any more. Reckon I have been a failure. Only this I'm tellin' you, Nona. I got your welfare at heart. And if you go to that supper tonight—at Eb Lucas's—you'll regret it. They'll tromp you under their feet. And he'll not stop 'em. Bein' what he is—a Lucas—he'll reckon it's rightful. Only," his voice rose, "don't call it love!"

He went to his old chair on the porch, then, sank heavily into it, without another word. He smoked his pipe out, filled it again and puffed at it furiously. He was still there when Jim Lucas came.

"Good evening," Jim said.

"Evenin'," Pop grunted, staring off into the distance. "See that you bring my girl home in time."

"I will that," Jim promised.

"And see that she's treated right. There's none better in the canyon."

"There's none so good," Jim said quietly.

Just inside the door, Thesby threw her arms impulsively about Nona. "Don't you worry about Pop, honey," she said. "He'll be all right, give him time. And Nona—"

"Yes, dear."

"You're beautiful tonight. You've got to know it. That blue foulard, it's lovely with your yellow hair. Jim's bound to be proud of you. And they'll love you, Nona, they can't help it!"

Nona smiled and kissed Thesby, and slipped out to Jim. She told Pop good-by, but if he heard her, he didn't show it. That hurt, of course, but it wouldn't last. Nona knew that. You couldn't keep Pop down long—and it had all been so much easier than she'd expected.

Jim was so dear, through all that ride. You're a sweet thing, Nona," he said. "Uncle Eb'll fall for you all right, once he let himself know you. He's a pretty good sort, deep inside, honey."

"Will it be—hard, Jim?" she asked.

"No," he said. "You're my girl, aren't you? You're going to be my wife. They'll all know that, and they'll make you part of our family. My wife," he repeated, and drew her to him, kissed her.

Jim kept her fears away—till they drew up at the big square white-painted house, with the picket-fence neatly enclosing the yard. The garden beyond was filled with people.

She caught Jim's arm, then. "Jim, let's go back! I—I'm afraid!"

He laughed. "You needn't be, darling.

They're our friends, our kin-folks. Might's well start knowin' 'em now."

Nona flung her yellow head high, and went out to the garden with Jim. She smiled graciously as Jim introduced her around. No one knew the cold fear that lay like a mass of ice in her heart. No one knew how she was trembling—that she held her hands tight-clenched to keep them from knowing.

Eb Lucas was like his house, square and compact and neat looking. A square man, with a squarish face, topped by bushy white hair; a stocky body, big hands and an outthrust jaw.

Nona felt like shrinking away when Jim brought him up to her. "I don't think you know Nona, Uncle," he said, "though you will—from now on. You'll be seeing a lot of her."

Uncle Eb didn't shake hands. He held his arms stiffly at his sides, and bowed. He didn't say he was pleased to meet her, either, and Nona felt as if his gray eyes were boring into her, picking out all the faults.

"I'm glad to know you," she said in a small voice.

"I hope you mean that," he said in deep tones. "Though you'll not find the McShane sort of pleasure here tonight." He turned away, setting his feet down firmly, squarely.

She caught her breath sharply, turned—to look up into Jim's tense worried face.

"Nona, I'm sorry," he jerked out. "He's no right to speak that way. I'll not have you hurt."

She made herself smile. "I'm not hurt, Jim. Pop wasn't nice to you, either. We'll—we'll see it through, together."

"Thanks, honey," he said.

They were spreading supper on long tables at the end of the garden, and Jim found a place for the two of them. Most of the folks were pleasant enough to Nona, but their glances were curious; That was all, Nona kept telling herself. Just curious; she was only imagining they were—hostile.

And then, after supper, it happened.

CHAPTER FOUR

Devil's Jig

THE women were washing dishes in the kitchen and Nona got up, began helping clear the tables as the other girls were doing.

"I'll be part of them," she thought. "Make them see that a McShane can be useful, too!"

She was going into the kitchen, her hands full of dishes, when she heard a woman's sharp voice. "Well, Jim has got his foot in a trap, all right! You can't exactly blame a young feller, of course. After all, when the youngest one'll stay out all night with a wild good-for-nothin' like Ernie Gage, you can pretty well know the sort this little hussy is."

Nona gasped. Before she could find words to flare out her anger, another woman went on:

"It's true—about Thesby McShane. Ernie Gage himself boasted about it, not only in the saloons he haunts, I reckon, but smack in the Blacksmith Shop! My Zach was there gettin' our gray mare shod, and he heard every word. Thesby left the dance with Ernie Gage, and—her voice went to a hoarse whisper—"didn't get home till sunup!"

"That's not true!" Nona finally found voice through the tightness of her throat. Setting the dishes down with a crash, she faced the roomful of women, defiantly. "Thesby did leave the dance with Ernie Gage, yes. Because she's young and foolish—and maybe because I didn't know how to take Mom's place since she died. But Thesby wasn't out all night—not with him! She got scared—yes, scared!" she repeated, angrily, turning on a thin-faced woman who gave a scornful laugh.

"I thought you McShanes didn't get scared!" the woman retorted with a taunting smile.

"Well, Thesby did!" Nona's yellow head was high, her brown eyes blazing. "She jumped from the buggy and had to keep hidden from Ernie till she got home. That's why it took so long, why she didn't get home till dawn."

There was silence, except for the clinking of dishes as the women turned back to

work. Nona stared at them, then she repeated furiously. "It's true! If you'd seen her when she got home that morning—" Her voice broke, remembering how Thesby had crumpled in her arms, and she couldn't go on.

Again there was silence, and Nona was aware of Jim, standing there beside her. She turned to him. "They won't believe me," she said huskily. "But they've got to, for Thesby's sake! A man like Ernie Gage—he can't be let to ruin a girl's reputation, just for revenge! Why, he wouldn't have said anything about it, if he hadn't been mad at Thesby for eluding him! They've got to believe me, Jim!"

"They will!" Unexpectedly, the cool clipped voice of Jim's uncle broke in. "For it's true about Thesby McShane. I heard my dog barking toward morning, that time, and I went out. I saw the girl cutting through below my corrals. When I called to her, she ran—but she was alone."

That's all it took. They believed the story then, because Eb Lucas had told it.

Nona turned to him. "Thank you," she said. "It was kind of you to do that. Thesby meant no harm, and it would have been cruel to have her hurt by it."

He didn't smile. He said, in those same level tones, "It's not my habit to let a lie stand." His eyes met hers in a cool direct stare, then he turned and walked outside.

The woman who had spread the tale spoke again; low, but loud enough for Nona to hear: "Well you can't get away from the fact that she did go with Ernie Gage, a carousin', no-good philanderer. And to a dance! It shows—"

Nona's anger, flayed by her hurt, rose once more. "It only shows you're disappointed to find the story isn't true! You'd like it to be true. Well, I want none of you!" It didn't seem as if it could be her own voice, saying those things.

"Nona!" Jim was holding tightly to her arm. "Don't talk like that. You don't mean it!"

SHE glanced about, met the ring of unfriendly eyes. She remembered how Eb Lucas had looked at her, and suddenly she wanted to be away from there. "I do mean it," she said, "and I'm going home."

She ran outside, started walking as swiftly as she could, head high, shoulders straight. She heard footsteps behind her. But when Jim drew alongside, she paid him no heed.

"Nona, you've got to listen. I'm taking you home." He caught her arm, led her to the buggy, helped her in. Then got in beside her, started away.

She didn't answer. She didn't even look at him. Pop was right! They reached home, and Jim helped her from the buggy. "Nona," he said, "don't look as if you don't want to see me ever again." His arms held her firmly.

"I don't," she said simply, and pulled away.

"But Nona, won't you listen, try to understand?"

"What is there to say? Or what is there to understand?"

"Nona! All I want is for you not to judge, till you know them better. And till they know you. Once they realize you're what you are, Nona, they'll change. Give them another chance, darling—for my sake."

Nona shook her head. "Not after the lie they *wanted* to believe about Thesby."

"That lie was scotched," he reminded her. "Uncle Eb saw to that."

"And *how* did he do it? If that's the Lucas brand of kindness, then I want none of it. I can't be a part of it, Jim."

"Then what about us, Nona?"

There was a note in his voice that frightened her. She jerked up her head, looked at him, saw something in his eyes that had been in his uncle's gaze—a cool hostility.

"What about us?" she echoed. "Just this, Jim Lucas. I'm through with trying to be one of your people. From now on, you'll come with me, be a part of the McShanes—or you can keep away from me."

Jim looked at her for a long, long moment, then, without another word, he got into the buggy, drove away. And though she watched him out of sight, he didn't look back . . . not once.

She walked up the path. Pop was on the porch, still sitting in his chair, and she stopped at the bottom of the steps, looked up at him.

"Well, Nona, girl?" he asked after a long time, and his voice sounded old and tired.

He was lighting his pipe, and she saw that

his hands were trembling till he could scarcely hold the match. He'd heard what she said at the gate, Nona knew.

"Well," she said, "looks like you'll have me on your hands for quite a spell yet, Pop." She tried to make her voice light and flippant. She laughed—a laugh that had no part in her—then slipped past Pop and on into the house. . . .

Never had Nona dreamed that days could be as long as were those next ones—or as bleak. Only a few hours stood out sharply—hours when her benumbed mind became suddenly aware of the loneliness of the future stretching ahead . . . without Jim.

The family were hurt, too. Vaguely Nona knew that; knew that Thesby found things for her to do to keep busy—and stayed close to her, chattering of simple things, yet requiring no answer. Even Bud tried to be all she'd wanted him to be through the years. He wiped his feet carefully before coming into the kitchen. He picked up his fishing tackle and put everything in place as much as he could.

And Pop. Never had Pop been so gentle. He wanted to help her, Nona knew. Once or twice he seemed trying to find words to talk to her, but Nona didn't give him a chance. She couldn't talk about it—not to anyone.

Pop made her listen to one thing. It was that next Friday. "Eb Lucas told down in the General Store about seeing Thesby that morning," he said. "So the story is scotched, all right." Then, awkwardly: "It was a decent thing for him to do, Nona. He didn't have to."

Pop sighed and turned away, and didn't say anthing more about it. But when they all sat at supper the next night, he looked up at her.

"Nona, I promised to play for tonight, but if you'd rather, none of us'll go to the dance."

She looked up, saw their sympathetic faces—this family of hers, so kind, so understanding, and it brought back vividly that other ring of faces, staring at her in mocking disbelief.

She laughed. "Go? Of course, we'll go. The McShanes always go—and have fun." She stood up, began gathering up the dishes. "Thesby and I will put on our prettiest dresses, and we'll dance half the night."

POP sighed, and Bud looked down at his half-emptied plate. Thesby was sober as they finished clearing the dishes and washed them; so sober that Nona spoke out, as she shook out the dishtowel.

"Stop looking so gloomy, Thes! Folks'll think you're mourning over Ernie. How do you expect to get partners if you droop around like a wilted plant?"

Pop's voice spoke quietly from the kitchen door. "You'll have a partner, anyhow, Nona," he said in queer tones.

She went to the door, stared at him, then past him to the gate. Her breath caught and her heart began to thud as she saw him. Jim. Redheaded Jim Lucas, all dressed up, his face pale under his tan.

"Jim!" she said, stepping toward him.

"Nona," he said simply, "I'll be a part of your world, from now on."

"Oh, Jim!" It was a little cry of joyousness, given as she ran toward him.

She lifted her face and his mouth was once more a flame against her own, and the early moon, peering over the rockrim of the canyon, seemed to glow more goldenly against the evening sky.

At last, Nona lifted her head, found they were alone. She laughed a little. "Oh, Jim, what if you hadn't come?"

"I had to come." Then he smiled. "But maybe I'd best ask you—may I have the pleasure of your company to the dance tonight, Miss McShane?"

"You may indeed, sir!" she returned, with a little mock curtsy. But deep down in her heart, the laughter echoed in sad little bells. For under the smile on Jim's face, she'd seen the tension. Beneath the tenderness in his eyes, was still that desperate hurt.

"But he came!" she told herself fiercely as she ran for her wrap. "That's all that matters!"

It should have been enough, surely, taking Jim Lucas to the dance with her, letting the world know that he cared enough to give up all his family—for her. . . .

Jim looked down at her as they danced to Pop's music. "Happy, darling?"

"Of course, Jim. And you—?"

A little silence, then he smiled. "My happiness is with you, Nona. Now and always."

"Yes, Jim. We—" She stopped, as Bud, gray-faced, touched her arm.

"They're outside," Bud mumbled. "Eb Lucas and all the others. Eb's got a rawhide whip, and Ernie Gage is outside with some of his gang, and they've got guns."

Nona drew a quick gasping breath. She looked at Jim, her eyes wide. "Your folks—"

There wasn't time to tell the rest, for a harsh voice sounded through the laughter and music.

Nona whirled, saw Eb Lucas in the doorway, his square figure compact and hostile, his spuare face hard, while both big hands gripped a huge rawhide whip.

"Stop!" his voice rasped out again. "Stop this devil's jiggin'! We've had enough of such in the canyon!"

The crowd went silent with shock. Pop's music stopped and he sat there on the platform a moment, looking over the heads of the others, straight into his enemy's eyes. Then, very deliberately, he put his fiddle down, stood up, started toward the door. The crowd fell back to either side of the hall, leaving the center clear. Behind Eb Lucas, in the doorway, Nona saw the crowd of others—kin-folks and friends of the Lucases, she knew.

Jim had stood as if frozen, but now he came alive. Pushing Nona gently aside, he strode across that cleared space, stood facing his uncle before Pop was well started. Jim's eyes were like glinting steel. "Uncle Eb, you're making a fool of yourself." Go on home. This is none of your affair."

"You're comin' with me," Eb Lucas said thickly, "even if I have to kill you to get you away from these McShanes."

He lifted the rawhide, and it was as if something snapped in Nona's mind—the way a photographer's camera snaps, capturing a picture for all time—and she saw things clearly, hopelessly.

"Jim! You can't fight your uncle!" she screamed and ran to him. Her sudden push threw him off balance, sending him staggering back just as the whip hissed through the air, came down—about Nona's arms and shoulders.

The sting of it made the hall spin. Little red stains sprang out on the ruffled bodice of her white dress.

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THERE was an appalled hush. Jim gave a low cry, picked her up tenderly in his arms. Eb Lucas dropped his whip and stood there, staring at her.

Then Ernie Gage's voice sounded as he leaped into the hall through one of the windows:

"Come on, you McShanes! We'll show 'em! We'll run 'em like the rats they are!" He waved his gun. "Get out, you women-folks! Clear the hall—we got man's work to do! And you Lucas sons—you got to stay and fight. We got men posted outside, case you try to run away!"

There was screaming and commotion. Jim started toward the side door, through which the women were pouring, his arms still tenderly cradling Nona.

"Stay outside, darling," he said, "and wait for me." He set her down, turned back to the center again.

But Nona couldn't leave. She moved back after Jim. When she felt somebody catch her hand, she knew, without looking up, that it was Thesby.

"Ernie Gage!" That was Pop. "You stay out o' this! It ain't your fight!"

Ernie laughed loudly. "Every fight is my fight!" he chortled. "Especially when it's a McShane fight! After last Saturday night, I got an interest in this family."

Thesby jerked out an angry cry. At the same instant Jim leaped, his fists flashing into Ernie's face. Ernie staggered back, then his gun hand came up. There was a flash, the whizz of a bullet . . . and the acrid smell of gun-smoke that seemed to be choking the breath from Nona's throat. And there was the smashing and crashing of fighting men that sprang alive, all in a minute.

"Nona!" There was something in the urgency of Thesby's voice that jerked Nona out of her maze. "Nona—look! Jim—Pop—Eb Lucas!"

Nona stared. Through the gun smoke and dust she saw it—the thing that had startled Thesby. The Lucases and the McShanes—fighting *together!* Pop, struggling with one of Ernie's followers, trying to take his gun. And, just as the man jerked free, Eb Lucas smashed out with the butt of his great whip, sending the gun spinning—then reaching to jerk Pop back beside him.

BEWARE A PRETTY FEUDIST!

Bud was standing back to back with Jim—the two of them fighting off a pair of Gage rowdies. Why, everything was all right! Nona saw it clearly. It was the way it had to be, through the rest of all time to come. McShane and Lucas, standing side by side, fighting all evil out of Gilead Canyon. The canyon—one world, at last.

Nobody could withstand them. Nona knew the fight would end quickly, and it did. There came the moment when Jim came back from throwing Ernie and the last of his bunch out of the front door, and Nona ran to him. She was caught close in his arms, held there, knowing she never wanted to be anywhere else.

With her head against Jim's shoulder, she saw Pop turn to Eb Lucas, and as their gazes met, their eyes shone with the satisfaction of a job well done.

Pop said, a bit awkwardly. "The womenfolks have things all ready for supper. If you'd stay—well, there's a-plenty, and I reckon we'd be glad to end the dancin'."

Eb Lucas looked at his friends, then turned back to Pop. "We'd be pleased to eat with you," he said, "if you'll come eat with us, next time. We'll be givin' another church supper at my place in two weeks—and we'd like to invite our friends in the canyon. You're all invited. And—" he stopped, cleared his throat, and his square jaw was out-thrust as he went on—"if you can forgive me for high-headedness, we'd—enjoy a bit of music with our supper."

This from Eb Lucas, who had always considered fiddle-music the devil's own pastime!

"We'll be there," Pop promised. "I'll play tunes you'll like, and Nona can chord for me. And I reckon I'm needin' to do some humblin' of my own—"

"Forget it," Eb Lucas said, and took Pop's hand. Then he came over to Nona, and his eyes were gentle. "If you can find it in your heart to forgive me, and accept me as an uncle—"

She reached up, kissed the square leathery chin, then turned, laughing, to Jim—feeling the pain of her shoulders not at all.

And Jim laughed back, as his arms tightened to carry her away from the crowd. And in his eyes she saw mirrored all the joy that lay ahead.

THE END

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(Continued from page 55)

brown eyed girl, who spends her days working for a used car concern.

As for my hobbies, I like best to write, having had quite a bit of experience as feature editor on the school paper before graduation. I also like movies, dancing, and reading good books.

Won't someone please write? There must be something we have in common and I do promise to answer every letter I get from servicemen, civilians and boys and girls all over the country. Come on and give me a try since I'd like to hear from everyone.

Thanking you, I remain,

Sincerely,
BETTY KROIN
7 Cambridge Ave.,
Garfield, N. J.

Jitterbug on Wheels

Dear Editor:

And pen pals, if this letter gets published. They call me "Mitch." I am a young man of 20 last April, I'm a Michigander. I have brown hair, big blue eyes, am five feet eight inches tall and weigh 140 lbs. I work for a construction company that travels all over the United States.

I would gladly answer any letters that I receive from boys or girls. I might even meet them sometime, as I hit all states. I write to people in ten different States now. So if any of you letter writers will write, especially girls, I would gladly answer.

I love to jitterbug and take pictures, bowl, roller-skate and even shoot a little pool. So, get out your pencil and paper, boys and girls, and drop me a line or two.

CLAUDE MITCHELL
309 East North Street
Sidney, Ohio

A Friendly "Hello!"

Dear Editor:

Well, this is the third time that I've tried to get my plea for Pen Pals published. I hope that I'm lucky this time because I really want to get some Pen Pals from all over the world.

I have read RANGELAND ROMANCES for quite awhile and you can bet it rates tops with me. I am a farm girl from the northern part of New Hampshire. I am 5' 6" tall, 17 years of age and have long dark brown hair and hazel eyes.

My hobbies are collecting postcards, souvenirs, snapshots of movie stars and pen pals. I like all outdoor sports as well as indoor. In my spare time, I write stories and sell dresses, children's wear and men's clothes.

I would really like to hear from people on ranches and farms, service men and women, boys and girls from the cities, those in war work—just everyone from 10 to 110, I don't care about the age. To the boys and girls who collect movie stills, I have over 100 and they are still coming. I'd be glad to exchange some or send you their addresses so you can write to them for a snap.

I'd like to hear from at least two from each

state and some from Canada, Mexico—anyone far or near. I'll be glad to write you all. To those who request postcards, I'll be glad to send you some. I promise to answer all letters I receive as soon as I can but first come first to get an answer, so come on all you fellows and gals who would like a quick smile and a friendly hello, drop me a line.

ROSE E. DOWNING
Rumney, New Hampshire

An Old Cowhand . . .

Dear Editor:

I enjoy reading RANGELAND ROMANCES, so I thought I'd see if I could get on the Pony Express and get a few pen pals. Especially you gals 5' 6" and over. I'm 19, 6' 4", 190 lbs., blue eyes and brown hair.

I was formerly an old cowhand and farmer in Nebraska and hope to be back there soon, so write me at Culbertson, Nebraska. Hope to get some letters soon.

PVT. FRANCIS L. WAGNER
ASN 37712953
Hoff General Hospital
Santa Barbara, Calif.

Give a Gal a Chance!

Dear Editor:

This is the first time I have tried to go through on the Pony Express. I have read RANGELAND ROMANCES for about two years now, and I like it very much. Each time I finish reading one copy, I can hardly wait for the next one.

I am a girl 17 years of age, am only 5 feet tall, have black hair and eyes almost as dark. I live here in the North and would like to get acquainted with people in the West. Come along friends, give a gal a chance! I'll write to anyone who writes to me. You aren't going to let a Northern gal down, are you? Help me by filling my mailbox.

I love to draw people of all kinds and will gladly show you some sketches. I may be from the North, but am keen on Western people and customs. Come on everyone, and pass some mail my way.

Sincerely,
CELIA LANZO
10 Valley Street
Concord, New Hampshire

Adios, amigos, till next month.

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(Continued from page 77)

storm broke—just as we'd gotten acros the bridge. So we came up here. That' all there was to it; you've got to believe that Arly."

"Have I, Dave? Why?"

"Because I've been such a double damned fool!" Dave burst out with un expected vehemence. "Because I didn' have the brains of a cow when it came t appreciating you! And because now, o top of everything else, I've gone and los the Bearpaw for you—for us! Oh, Arly what a mess I've made of things! If I' only been able to get across Lame John ny—"

Arly interrupted: "I tried to call yo back, Dave, before you left the cabin. Yo didn't have to get across the Lame John ny."

Dave stared at her blankly. "Didn't hav to? But Gilda—"

"Will get to Arch Dunham's to find th someone has taken an option on the Bea paw ahead of her," Arly broke throug quietly.

"Someone else!"

"Me," Arly said, and felt that pleasan warmth stealing through her again a Dave's eyes reached her in widening amaz ment.

"You!" Dave exclaimed. "But where how—?"

"Biscuit Burdette had money saved up Arly explained. "He loaned me enough make a first payment. I went over to s Arch Dunham right after you and Gil were over to—"

She didn't finish. Dave's arm was cree ing around her; she felt her breath tight as the arm drew her against him, slowl gently.

"I've got money saved up too, Arly. B I felt we needed a little more. That's w I wanted to hang and rattle at Double a little longer. I planned to hit Gilda Ma vin for a raise—"

Arly's voice dropped down from t clouds. "And what do you plan to do no Dave?"

"Right now," said Dave, "I plan to this." And his kiss tingling on her lips w all the answer she would need—ever a forever.

(Continued from page 21)

"Vivian's going back tomorrow," Dan said. "Bill's siding her. Bill Morgan. He's a pretty decent feller, Judy. He says you're great, too. He says it was springtime, he guessed, that made him kiss you. He says he ain't sorry."

Air shuddered into Judy's breast. Six days they would be on the trail to the fort, alone except for the captives—six days in which Dan would always be aware of the fact that she was not a short-pants kid and that she had been found desirable by another man.

"This lady business—" Dan hesitated. "Look—a girl can be a lady and useful at the same time. Just because you're wearing pants and your shirttails are out it don't prove you wouldn't make a good wife for the man who's lucky enough to marry a girl like you."

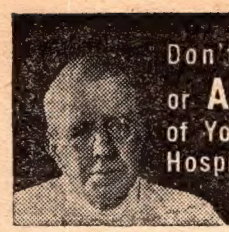
She moved over slightly so her lovely and slender figure was silhouetted against the glowing lantern and the star-studded river.

"Who you arguin' with, Dan'l?"

"Me," he said.

Then he grinned. He stumbled the few steps up to her and lifted her from the ground. Judy threw her arm around his neck, pulling his face down to hers and kissing him hungrily. His kisses were not as expert, possibly, as Mister Morgan's, but Judy did not contrast them. She had forgotten all about the mining engineer and all about Vivian, or why they were on the way to the fort. All she knew was that Dan had finally taken her into his arms and that it was wonderful.

THE END



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(Continued from page 53)

Austin had said about the ranch. "He wouldn't do anything without a profit. He would have bought you out, Bart, to get you out of town so I would marry him. Austin knew that as long as you were here —I couldn't ever marry him."

"Darling." Bart passed Frances as if she were invisible. He took Vangie in his arms. "It doesn't matter now as long—"

"But that wasn't Austin's only reason. The federal government is taking over mail service across the country. Your line, all the established stage lines, will get regular contracts. Frances knew about that because her father is in on the deal. She and Austin were talking in his office tonight. I should have understood then. She told Austin about it so he would buy you out and you would go with her and—"

"All right! It's true!" Frances caught Vangie's arm, tried to pull her away from Bart. "But what does it prove? You didn't love him enough before but now that Bart is going to have enough money to support you, you come running back to him."

"Why, you—" Vangie's fury boiled over. She couldn't hold it any longer. She leaped at Frances.

The two girls fell to the ground in a wild swish of flying satin.

Frances clawed at Vangie, squealing. Vangie pinned her down. "Take that back! Take back every word of it!"

Frances squirmed, her legs threshing the air as she tried to roll over. There was a long ripping sound. "My dress!" Frances squealed. "You've ruined my dress!"

Bart's hands gripped Vangie's shoulders. He lifted her. "You didn't have to prove you love me, darling." His grin was wide.

He glanced down at Frances as she got to her feet. He quickly slipped his arms from his jacket and handed it to the girl. "You'd better take this."

Vangie lifted her hand and gently turned Bart's head. But she didn't need to do that. He wasn't looking at Frances now. His eyes were for Vangie and his smile was hers and his arms were tight around her. And the way Bart kissed her, Vangie knew that as far as Bart was concerned Frances might as well stand shivering in some other world.

THE END

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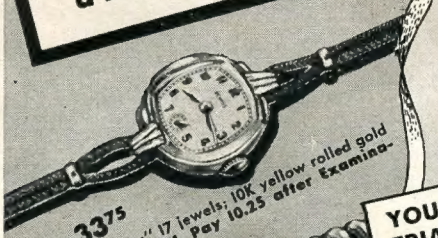

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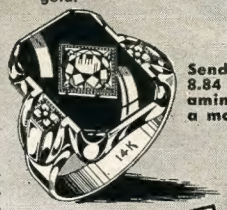

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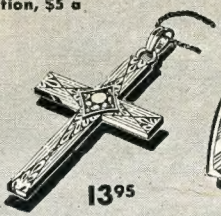

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